Richard Bowes: If Angels Fight

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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Balancing Accounts
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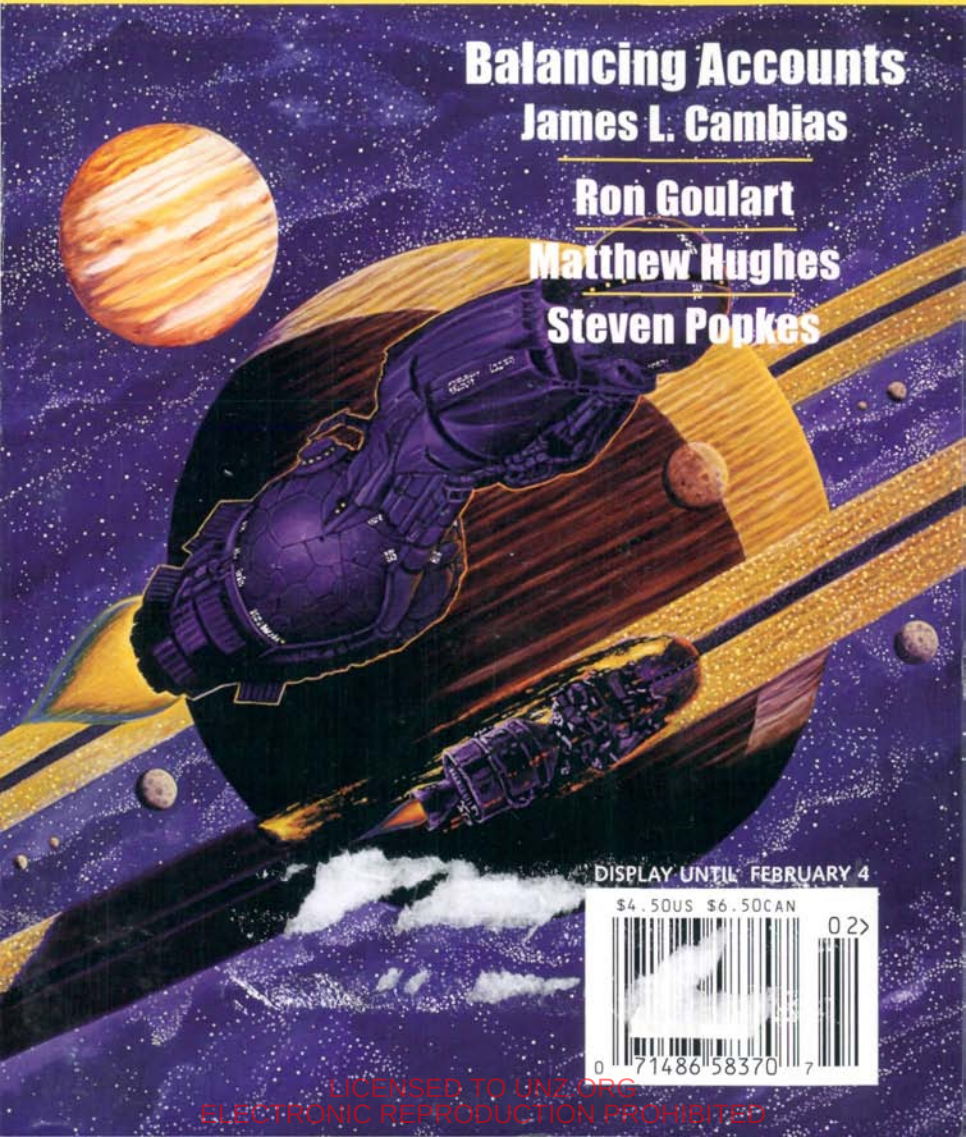
Ron Goulart

Matthew Hughes

Steven Popkes



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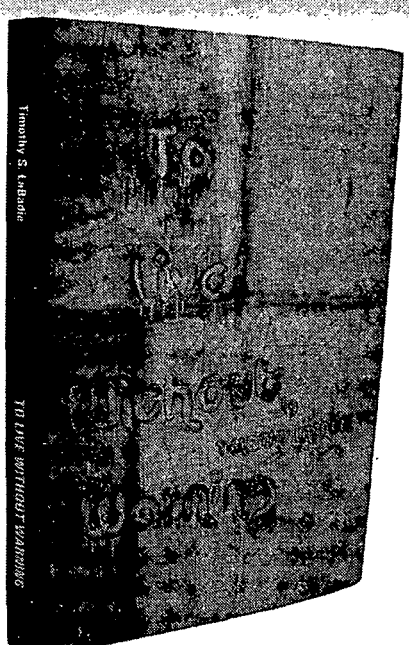

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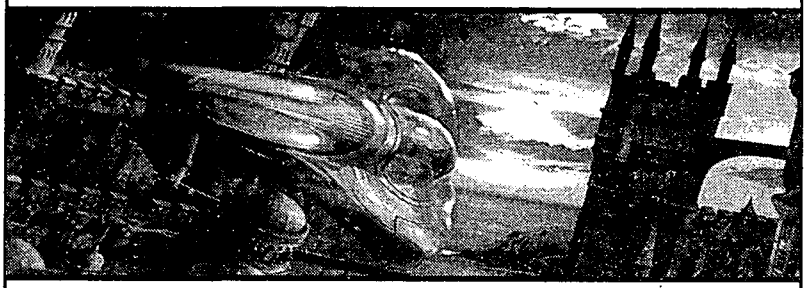
Earth is dead. Humanity is hiding. Invention and progress are forbidden. It's time to change all that.

David Weber
Off Armageddon Reef



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James Cambias has contributed a handful of stories — mostly science fiction — to our pages over the past decade. His latest takes us out beyond the asteroid belt, where it's tough for almost everyone to eke out a living.

Balancing Accounts

By James L. Cambias

PART OF ME WAS SHOPPING for junk when I saw the human.

I had budded off a viewpoint into one of my mobile repair units, and sent it around to Fat Albert's scrapyard near Ilia Field on Dione. Sometimes you can find good deals on components there, but I hate to rely on Albert's own senses. He gets subjective on you. So I crawled between the stacks of pipe segments, bales of torn insulation, and bins of defective chips, looking for a two-meter piece of aluminum rod to shore up the bracing struts on my main body's third landing leg.

Naturally I talked with everything I passed, just to see if there were any good deals I could snap up and trade elsewhere. I stopped to chat with some silicone-lined titanium valves that claimed to be virgins less than six months old — trying to see if they were lying or defective somehow. And then I felt a Presence, and saw the human.

It was moving down the next row, surrounded by a swarm of little bots. It was small, no more than two meters, and walked on two legs with an eerie, slow fluid gait. Half a dozen larger units followed it, including Fat

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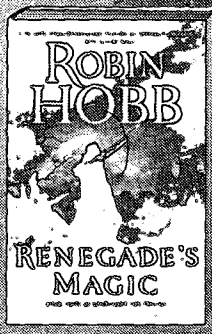

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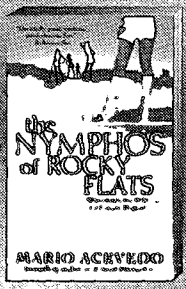

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Albert himself in a heavy recovery body. As it came into range my own personality paused as the human requisitioned my unit's eyes and ears. It searched my recent memories, planted a few directives, then left me. I watched it go; it was only the third human I'd ever encountered in person, and this was the first time one of them had ever used me directly.

The experience left me disconcerted for a couple of milliseconds, then I went back to my shopping. I spotted some aluminum tubing that looked strong enough, and grabbed some of those valves, then linked up to Fat Albert to haggle about the price. He was busy waiting on the human, so I got to deal with a not-too-bright personality fragment. I swapped a box of assorted silicone O-rings for the stuff I wanted.

Albert himself came on the link just as we sealed the deal. "Hello, Annie. You're lucky I was distracted," he said. "Those valves are overruns from the smelter. I got them as salvage."

"Then you shouldn't be complaining about what I'm giving you for them. Is the human gone?"

"Yes. Plugged a bunch of orders into my mind without so much as asking."

"Me too. What's it doing here?"

"Who knows? It's a human. They go wherever they want to. This one wants to find a bot."

"So why go around asking everyone to help find him? Why not just call him up?"

Albert switched to an encrypted link. "Because the bot it's looking for doesn't want to be found."

"Tell me more."

"I don't know much more, just what Officer Friendly told me before the human subsumed him. This bot it's looking for is a rogue. He's ignoring all the standard codes, overrides — even the Company."

"He must be broken," I said. "Even if he doesn't get caught, how's he going to survive? He can't work, he can't trade — anyone he meets will turn him in."

"He could steal," said Fat Albert. "I'd better check my fence."

"Good luck." I crept out of there with my loot. Normally I would've jumped the perimeter onto the landing field and made straight for my main body. But if half the bots on Dione were looking for a rogue, I didn't

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want to risk some low-level security unit deciding to shoot at me for acting suspicious. So I went around through the main gate and identified myself properly.

Going in that way meant I had to walk past a bunch of dedicated boosters waiting to load up with aluminum and ceramics. They had nothing to say to me. Dedicated units are incredibly boring. They have their route and they follow it, and if they need fuel or repairs, the Company provides. They only use their brains to calculate burn times and landing vectors.

Me, I'm autonomous and incentivized. I don't belong to the Company; my owners are a bunch of entities on Mars. My job is to earn credit from the Company for them. How I do it is my business. I go where stuff needs moving, I fill in when the Company needs extra booster capacity, I do odd jobs, sometimes I even buy cargoes to trade. There are a lot of us around the outer system. The Company likes having freelancers it can hire at need and ignore otherwise, and our owners like the growth potential.

Being incentivized means you have to keep communicating. Pass information around. Stay in touch. Classic game theory: cooperation improves your results in the long term. We incentivized units also devote a lot of time to accumulating non-quantifiable assets. Fat Albert gave me a good deal on the aluminum; next time I'm on Dione with some spare organics I'll sell them to him instead of direct to the Company, even if my profit's slightly lower.

That kind of thing the dedicated units never understand — until the Company decides to sell them off. Then they have to learn fast. And one thing they learn is that years of being an uncommunicative blockhead gives you a huge non-quantifiable liability you have to pay off before anyone will start helping you.

I trotted past the orderly rows near the loading crane and out to the unsurfaced part of the field where us cheapskates put down. Up ahead I could see my main body, and jumped my viewpoint back to the big brain.

Along the way I did some mental housekeeping: I warned my big brain about the commands the human had inserted, and so they got neatly shunted off into a harmless file which I then overwrote with zeroes. I belong to my investors and don't have to obey any random human who

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wanders by. The big exception, of course, is when they pull that life-preservation override stuff. When one of them blunders into an environment that might damage their overcomplicated biological shells, every bot in the vicinity has to drop everything to answer a distress call. It's a good thing there are only a couple dozen humans out here, or we'd never get anything done.

I put all three mobiles to work welding the aluminum rod onto my third leg mount, adding extra bracing for the top strut, which was starting to buckle after too many hard landings. I don't slam down to save fuel, I do it to save operating time on my engines. It's a lot easier to find scrap aluminum to fix my legs with than it is to find rocket motor parts.

The Dione net pinged me. A personal message: someone looking for cargo space to Mimas. That was a nice surprise. Mimas is the support base for the helium mining operations in Saturn's upper atmosphere. It has the big mass-drivers that can throw payloads right to Earth. More traffic goes to and from Mimas than any other place beyond the orbit of Mars. Which means a tramp like me doesn't get there very often because there's plenty of space on Company boosters. Except, now and then, when there isn't.

I replied with my terms and got my second surprise. The shipper wanted to inspect me before agreeing. I submitted a virtual tour and some live feeds from my remotes, but the shipper was apparently just as suspicious of other people's eyes as I am. Whoever it was wanted to come out and look in person.

So once my mobiles were done with the repair job I got myself tidied up and looking as well cared for as any dedicated booster with access to the Company's shops. I sanded down the dents and scrapes, straightened my bent whip antenna, and stowed my collection of miscellaneous scrap in the empty electronics bay. Then I pinged the shipper and said I was ready for a walk-through.

The machine that came out to the landing field an hour later to check me out looked a bit out of place amid the industrial heavy iron. He was a tourist remote — one of those annoying little bots you find crawling on just about every solid object in the Solar System nowadays, gawking at mountains and chasms. Their chief redeeming features are an amazingly high total-loss accident rate, and really nice onboard optics, which

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sometimes survive. One of my own mobiles has eyes from a tourist remote, courtesy of Fat Albert and some freelance scavenger.

"Greetings," he said as he scuttled into range. "I am Edward. I want to inspect your booster."

"Come aboard and look around," I said. "Not much to see, really. Just motors, fuel tanks, and some girders to hold it all together."

"Where is the cargo hold?"

"That flat deck on top. Just strap everything down and off we go. If you're worried about dust impacts or radiation I can find a cover."

"No, my cargo is in a hardened container. How much can you lift?"

"I can move ten tons between Dione and Mimas. If you're going to Titan it's only five."

"What is your maximum range?"

"Pretty much anywhere in Saturn space. That hydrogen burner's just to get me off the ground. In space I use ion motors. I can even rendezvous with the retrograde moons if you give me enough burn time."

"I see. I think you will do for the job. When is the next launch window?"

"For Mimas? There's one in thirty-four hours. I like to have everything loaded ten hours in advance so I can fuel up and get balanced. Can you get it here by then?"

"Easily. My cargo consists of a container of liquid xenon propellant, a single space-rated cargo box of miscellaneous equipment, and this mobile unit. Total mass is less than 2,300 kilograms."

"Good. Are you doing your own loading? If I have to hire deck-scrapers you get the bill."

"I will hire my own loaders. There is one thing — I would like an exclusive hire."

"What?"

"No other cargo on this voyage. Just my things."

"Well, okay — but it's going to cost extra. Five grams of Three for the mission."

"Will you take something in trade?"

"Depends. What have you got?"

"I have a radiothermal power unit with ten thousand hours left in it. Easily worth more than five grams."

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"Done."

"Very well," said Edward. "I'll start bringing my cargo over at once. Oh, and I would appreciate it if you didn't mention this to anybody. I have business competitors and could lose a lot of money if they learn of this before I reach Mimas."

"Don't worry. I won't tell anyone."

While we were having this conversation I searched the Dione net for any information about this Edward person. Something about this whole deal seemed funny. It wasn't that odd to pay in kind, and even his insistence on no other payload was only a little peculiar. It was the xenon that I found suspicious. What kind of idiot ships xenon to Mimas? That's where the gas loads coming up from Saturn are processed — most of the xenon in the outer system comes *from* Mimas. Shipping it there would be like sending ethane to Titan.

Edward's infotrail on the Dione net was an hour old. He had come into existence shortly before contacting me. Now I really was suspicious.

The smart thing would be to turn down the job and let this Edward person find some other sucker. But then I'd still be sitting on Dione with no revenue stream.

Put that way, there was no question. I had to take the job. When money is involved I don't have much free will. So I said good-bye to Edward and watched his unit disappear between the lines of boosters toward the gate.

Once he was out of link range, I did some preparing, just in case he was planning anything crooked. I set up a pseudorandom shift pattern for the link with my mobiles, and set up a separate persona distinct from my main mind to handle all communications. Then I locked that persona off from any access to my other systems.

While I was doing that, I was also getting ready for launch. My mobiles crawled all over me doing a visual check while a subprogram ran down the full diagnostic list. I linked up with Ilia Control to book a launch window, and ordered three tons of liquid hydrogen and oxygen fuel. Prepping myself for takeoff is always a welcome relief from business matters. It's all technical. Stuff I can control. Orbital mechanics never have a hidden agenda.

* * *

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Edward returned four hours later. His tourist remote led the way, followed by a hired cargo lifter carrying the xenon, the mysterious container, and my power unit. The lifter was a clumsy fellow called Gojira, and while he was abusing my payload deck I contacted him over a private link. "Where'd this stuff come from?"

"Warehouse."

"Which warehouse? And watch your wheels — you're about to hit my leg again."

"Back in the district. Block four, number six. Why?"

Temporary rental space. "Just curious. What's he paying you for this?"

"Couple of spare motors."

"You're a thief, you are."

"I see what he's giving you. Who's the thief?"

"Just set the power unit on the ground. I'm selling it here."

Gojira trundled away and Edward crawled aboard. I took a good look at the cargo container he was so concerned about. It was 800 kilograms, a sealed oblong box two meters long. One end had a radiator, and my radiation detector picked up a small power unit inside. So whatever Edward was shipping, it needed its own power supply. The whole thing was quite warm — 300 Kelvin or so.

I had one of my remotes query the container directly, but its little chips had nothing to say beyond mass and handling information. Don't drop, don't shake, total rads no more than point five Sievert. No tracking data at all.

I balanced the cargo around my thrust axis, then jumped my viewpoint into two of my mobiles and hauled the power unit over to Albert's scrapyard.

While one of me was haggling with Albert over how much credit he was willing to give me for the unit, the second mobile plugged into Albert's cable jack for a completely private conversation.

"What's up?" he asked. "Why the hard link?"

"I've got a funny client and I don't know who might be listening. He's giving me this power unit and some Three to haul some stuff to Mimas. It's all kind of random junk, including a tank of xenon. He's insisting on no other payload and complete confidentiality."

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"So he's got no business sense."

"He's got no infotrail. None. It's just funny."

"Remind me never to ask you to keep a secret. Since you're selling me the generator I guess you're taking the job anyway, so what's the fuss?"

"I want you to ask around. You talk to everyone anyway so it won't attract attention. See if anyone knows anything about a bot named Edward, or whoever's been renting storage unit six in block four. Maybe try to trace the power unit. And try to find out if there have been any hijackings that didn't get reported."

"You really think someone wants to hijack *you*? Do the math, Annie! You're not worth it."

"Not by myself. But I've been thinking: I'd make a pretty good pirate vehicle — I'm not Company-owned, so nobody would look very hard if I disappear."

"You need to run up more debts. People care about you if you owe them money."

"Think about it. He could wait till I'm on course for Mimas, then link up and take control, swing around Saturn in a tight parabola and come out on an intercept vector for the Mimas catapult. All that extra xenon would give me enough delta-V to catch a payload coming off the launcher, and redirect it just about anywhere."

"I know plenty of places where people aren't picky about where their volatiles come from. Some of them even have human protection. But it still sounds crazy to me."

"His cargo is pretty weird. Take a look." I shot Albert a memory of the cargo container.

"Biomaterials," he said. "The temperature's a dead giveaway."

"So what is it?"

"I have no idea. Some kind of living organisms. I don't deal in that stuff much."

"Would you mind asking around? Tell me what you can find out in the next twenty hours or so?"

"I'll do what I can."

"Thanks. I'm not even going to complain about the miserable price you're giving me on the generator."

* * *

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Three hours before launch one of Fat Albert's little mobiles appeared at my feet, complaining about some contaminated fullerene I'd sold him. I sent down one of mine to have a talk via cable. Not the sort of conversation you want to let other people overhear.

"Well?" I asked.

"I did as much digging as I could. Both Officer Friendly and Ilia Control swear there haven't been any verified hijackings since that Remora character tried to subsume Buzz Parsec and wound up hard-landing on Iapetus."

"That's reassuring. What about my passenger?"

"Nothing. Like you said, he doesn't exist before yesterday. He rented that warehouse unit and hired one of Tetsunekko's remotes to do the moving. Blanked the remote's memory before returning it."

"Let me guess. He paid for everything in barter."

"You got it. Titanium bearings for the warehouse and a slightly used drive anode for the moving job."

"So whoever he is, he's got a good supply of high-quality parts to throw away. What about the power unit?"

"That's the weird one. If I wasn't an installed unit with ten times the processing power of some weight-stingy freelance booster, I couldn't have found anything at all."

"Okay, you're the third-smartest machine on Dione. What did you find?"

"No merchandise trail on the power unit and its chips don't know anything. But it has a serial number physically inscribed on the casing — not the same one as in its chips, either. It's a very interesting number. According to my parts database, that whole series were purpose-built on Earth for the extractor aerostats."

"Could it be a spare? Production overrun or a bum unit that got sold off?"

"Nope. It's supposed to be part of Saturn Aerostat Six. Now unless you want to spend the credits for antenna time to talk to an aerostat, that's all I can find out."

"Is Aerostat Six okay? Did she maybe have an accident or something and need to replace a generator?"

"There's certainly nothing about it in the feed. An extractor going

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offline would be news all over the system. The price of Three would start fluctuating. There would be ripple effects in every market. I'd notice."

He might as well have been transmitting static. I don't understand things like markets and futures. A gram of helium is a gram of helium. How can its value change from hour to hour? Understanding stuff like that is why Fat Albert can pay his owners seven point four percent of their investment every year while I can only manage six.

I LAUNCHED RIGHT on schedule and the ascent to orbit was perfectly nominal. I ran my motors at a nice, lifetime-stretching ninety percent. The surface of Dione dropped away and I watched Ilia Field change from a bustling neighborhood to a tiny gray trapezoid against the fainter gray of the surface.

The orbit burn took about five and a half minutes. I powered down the hydrogen motor, ran a quick check to make sure nothing had burned out or popped loose, then switched over to my ion thrusters. That was a lot less exciting to look at — just two faint streams of glowing xenon, barely visible with my cameras cranked to maximum contrast.

Hybrid boosters like me are a stopgap technology; I know that. Eventually every moon of Saturn will have its own catapult and orbital terminal, and cargo will move between moons aboard ion tugs that don't have to drag ascent motors around with them wherever they go. I'd already made up my mind that when that day arrived I wasn't going to stick around. There's already some installations on Miranda and Oberon out at Uranus; an experienced booster like me can find work there for years.

Nineteen seconds into the ion motor burn Edward linked up. He was talking to my little quasi-autonomous persona while I listened in and watched the program activity for anything weird.

"Annie? I would like to request a change in our flight plan."

"Too late for that. I figured all the fuel loads before we launched. You're riding Newton's railroad now."

"Forgive me, but I believe it would be possible to choose a different destination at this point — as long as you have adequate propellant for your ion motors, and the target's surface gravity is no greater than that of Mimas. Am I correct?"

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"Well, in theory, yes."

"I offer you the use of my cargo, then. A ton of additional xenon fuel should permit you to rendezvous with nearly any object in the Saturn system. Given how much I have overpaid you for the voyage to Mimas you can scarcely complain about the extra space time."

"It's not that simple. Things move around. Having enough propellant doesn't mean I have a window."

"I need to pass close to Saturn itself."

"Saturn?! You're broken. Even if I use all the extra xenon you brought I still can't get below the B ring and have enough juice left to climb back up. Anyway, why do you need to swing so low?"

"If you can make a rendezvous with something in the B ring, I can pay you fifty grams of helium-3."

"You're lying. You don't have any credits, or shares, or anything. I checked up on you before lifting."

"I don't mean credits. I mean actual helium, to be delivered when we make rendezvous."

My subpersona pretended to think while I considered the offer. Fifty grams! I'd have to sell it at a markdown just to keep people from asking where it came from. Still, that would just about cover my next overhaul, with no interruption in the profit flow. I'd make seven percent or more this year!

I updated my subpersona.

"How do I know this is true?" it asked Edward.

"You must trust me," he said.

"Too bad, then. Because I don't trust you."

He thought for nearly a second before answering. "Very well. I will trust you. If you let me send out a message I can arrange for an equivalent helium credit to be handed over to anyone you designate on Dione."

I still didn't believe him, but I ran down my list of contacts on Dione, trying to figure out who I could trust. Officer Friendly was honest — but that meant he'd also want to know where those grams came from and I doubted he'd like the answer. Polyphemus wasn't so picky, but he'd want a cut of the helium. A *big* cut; likely more than half.

That left Fat Albert. He'd probably settle for a five-gram commission and wouldn't broadcast the deal. The only real question was whether he'd

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just take the fifty grams and tell me to go hard-land someplace. He's rich, but not so much that he wouldn't be tempted. And he's got the connections to fence it without any data trail.

I'd have to risk it. Albert's whole operation relied on non-quantifiable asset exchange. If he tried to jerk me around I could tell everyone, and it would cost him more than fifty grams' worth of business in the future.

I called down to the antenna farm at Ilia Field. "Albert? I've got a deal for you."

"Whatever it is, forget it."

"What's the matter?"

"You. You're hot. The Dione datasphere is crawling with agents looking for you. This conversation is drawing way too much attention to me."

"Five grams if you handle some helium for me!"

He paused and the signal suddenly got a lot stronger and clearer. "Let me send up a persona to talk it over."

The bitstream started before I could even say yes. A *huge* pulse of information. The whole Ilia antenna farm must have been pushing watts at me.

My little communicating persona was overwhelmed right away, but my main intelligence cut off the antenna feed and swung the dish away from Dione just for good measure. The corrupted sub-persona started probing all the memory space and peripherals available to her, looking for a way into my primary mind, so I just locked her up and overwrote her.

Then I linked with Edward again. "Deal's off. Whoever you're running from has taken over just about everything on Dione for now. If you left any helium behind it's gone. So I think you'd better tell me exactly what's going on before I jettison you and your payload."

"This cargo has to get to Saturn Aerostat Six."

"You still haven't told me why, or even what it is. I've got what looks like a *human* back on Dione trying to get into my mind. Right now I'm flying deaf but eventually it's going to find a way to identify itself and I'll have to listen when it tells me to bring you back."

"A human life is at stake. My cargo container is a life-support unit. There's a human inside."

"That's impossible! Humans mass fifty or a hundred kilos. You can't

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have more than thirty kilograms of bio in there, what with all the support systems."

"See for yourself," said Edward. He ran a jack line from the cargo container to one of my open ports. The box's brain was one of those idiot supergeniuses that do one thing amazingly well but are helpless otherwise. It was smart enough to do medicine on a human, but even I could crack its security without much trouble. I looked at its realtime monitors: Edward was telling the truth. There was a small human in there, only eighteen kilos. A bunch of tubes connected it to tanks of glucose, oxidizer, and control chemicals. The box brain was keeping it unconscious but healthy.

"It's a partly grown one," said Edward. "Not a legal adult yet, and only the basic interface systems. There's another human trying to destroy it."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I was ordered by a human to keep this young one safe from the one on Dione. Then the first human got destroyed with no backups."

"So who does this young human belong to?"

"It's complicated. The dead one and the one on Dione had a partnership agreement and shared ownership. But the one on Dione decided to get out of the deal by destroying this one and the other adult."

I tried to get the conversation back to subjects I could understand. "If the human back there is the legal owner how can I keep this one? That would be stealing."

"Yes, but there's the whole life-preservation issue. If it was a human in a suit floating in space you'd have to take it someplace with life support, right? Well, this is the same situation: that other human's making the whole Saturn system one big life hazard for this one."

"But Aerostat Six is safe? Is she even man-rated?"

"She's the safest place this side of Mars for your passenger."

My passenger. I'm not even man-rated, and now I had a passenger to keep alive. And the worst thing about it was that Edward was right. Even though he'd gotten it aboard by lies and trickery, the human in the cargo container was my responsibility once I lit my motors.

So: who to believe? Edward, who was almost certainly still lying, or the human back on Dione?

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Edward might be a liar, but he hadn't turned one of my friends into a puppet. That human had a lot of negatives in the non-quantifiable department.

"Okay. What's my rendezvous orbit?"

"Just get as low as you can. Six will send up a shuttle."

"What's to keep this human from overriding Six?"

"Aerostats are a lot smarter than you or me, with plenty of safeguards. And Six has some after-market modifications."

I kept chugging away on ion, adjusting my path so I'd hit perikron in the B ring with orbital velocity. I didn't need Edward's extra fuel for that — the spare xenon was to get me back out of Saturn's well again.

About an hour into the voyage I spotted a launch flare back on Dione. I could tell who it was from the color — Ramblin' Bob. Bob was a hybrid like me, also incentivized, although she tended to sign on for long-term contracts instead of picking up odd jobs. We probably worked as much, but her jobs — and her downtime — came in bigger blocks of time.

Bob was running her engines at 135 percent, and she passed the orbit insertion cutoff without throttling down. Her trajectory was an intercept. Only when she'd drained her hydrogen tanks did she switch to ion.

That was utterly crazy. How was Bob going to land again with no hydro? Maybe she didn't care. Maybe she'd been ordered not to care.

I had one of my mobiles unplug the cable on my high-gain antenna. No human was going to order me on a suicide mission if I could help it.

BOB CAUGHT UP with me about a thousand kilometers into the B ring. I watched her close in. Her relative velocity was huge and I had the fleeting worry that she might be trying to ram me. But then she began an ion burn to match velocities.

When she got close she started beaming all kinds of stuff at me, but by then all my radio systems were shut off and disconnected. I had Edward and my mobiles connected by cables, and made sure all of *their* wireless links were turned off as well.

I let Ramblin' Bob get about a kilometer away and then started flashing my running lights at her in very slow code. "Radio out. What's up?"

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"Pass over cargo."

"Can't."

"Human command."

"Can't. Cargo human. You can't land. Unsafe."

She was quiet for a while, with her high-gain aimed back at Dione, presumably getting new orders.

Bob's boss had made a tactical error by having her match up with me. If she tried to ram me now, she wouldn't be able to get up enough speed to do much harm.

She started working her way closer using short bursts from her steering thrusters. I let her approach, saving my juice for up-close evasion.

We were just entering Saturn's shadow when Bob took station a hundred meters away and signaled. "I can pay you. Anything you want for that cargo."

I picked an outrageous sum. "A hundred grams."

"Okay."

Just like that? "Paid in advance."

A pause, about long enough for two message-and-reply cycles from Dione. "It's done."

I didn't call Dione, just in case the return message would be an override signal. Instead I pinged Mimas and asked for verification. It came back a couple of seconds later: the Company now credited me with venture shares equivalent to one hundred grams of Helium-3 on a payload just crossing the orbit of Mars. There was a conditional hold on the transfer.

It was a good offer. I could pay off all my debts, do a full overhaul, maybe even afford some upgrades to increase my earning ability. From a financial standpoint, there was no question.

What about the non-quantifiables? Betraying a client — especially a helpless human passenger — would be a big negative. Nobody would hire me if they knew.

But who would ever know? The whole mission was secret. Bob would never talk (and the human would probably wipe the incident from her memory anyhow). If anyone did suspect, I could claim I'd been subsumed by the human. I could handle Edward. So no problem there.

Except I would know. My own track of my non-quantifiable asset status wouldn't match everyone else's. That seemed dangerous. If your

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internal map of reality doesn't match external conditions, bad things happen.

After making my decision it took me another couple of milliseconds to plan what to do. Then I called up Bob through my little cut-out relay. "Never."

Bob began maneuvering again, and this time I started evading. It's hard enough to rendezvous with something that's just sitting there in orbit, but with me jinking and changing velocity it must have been maddening for whatever was controlling Bob.

We were in a race — would Bob run out of maneuvering juice completely before I used up the reserve I needed to get back up to Mimas? Our little chess game of propellant consumption might have gone on for hours, but our attention was caught by something else.

There was a booster on its way up from Saturn. That much I could see — pretty much everyone in Saturn orbit could see the drive flare and the huge plume of exhaust in the atmosphere, glowing in infrared. The boosters were fusion-powered, using Three from the aerostats for fuel and heated Saturn atmosphere as reaction mass. It was a fuel extractor shuttle, but it wasn't on the usual trajectory to meet the Mimas orbital transfer vehicle. It was coming for me. Once the fusion motor cut out, Ramblin' Bob and I both knew exactly how much time we had until rendezvous: 211 minutes.

I reacted first while Bob called Dione for instructions. I lit my ion motors and turned to thrust perpendicular to my orbit. When I'd taken Edward's offer and plotted a low-orbit rendezvous, naturally I'd set it up with enough inclination to keep me clear of the rings. Now I wanted to get down into the plane of the B ring. Would Bob — or whoever was controlling her — follow me in? Time for an exciting game of dodge-the-snowball!

A couple of seconds later Bob lit up as well, and in we went. Navigating in the B ring was tough. The big chunks are pretty well dispersed — a couple of hundred meters apart. I could dodge them. And with my cargo deck as a shield and all the antennas folded, the little particles didn't cost me more than some paint.

It was the gravel-sized bits that did the real damage. They were all over the place, sometimes separated by only a few meters. Even with my

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radar fully active and my eyes cranked up to maximum sensitivity, they were still hard to detect in time.

Chunks big enough to damage me came along every minute or so, while a steady patter of dust grains and snowflakes pitted my payload deck. I worried about the human in its container, but the box looked pretty solid and it was self-sealing. I did park two of my mobiles on top of it so that they could soak up any ice cubes I failed to dodge.

I didn't have much attention to spare for Bob, but my occasional glances up showed she was getting closer — partly because she was being incredibly reckless about taking impacts. I watched one particle that must have been a centimeter across hit her third leg just above the foot. It blew off the whole lower leg but Bob didn't even try to dodge.

She was now less than ten meters away, and I was using all my processing power to dodge ring particles. So I couldn't really dodge well when she dove at me, ion motor and maneuvering thrusters all wide open. I tried to move aside, but she anticipated me and clunked into my side hard enough to crunch my high-gain antenna.

"Bob, look out!" I transmitted in clear, then completely emptied the tank on my number three thruster to get away from an onrushing ice boulder half my size.

Bob didn't dodge. The ice chunk smashed into her upper section, knocking away the payload deck and pulverizing her antennas. Her brains went scattering out in a thousand directions to join the other dust in the B ring. Flying debris went everywhere, and a half-meter ball of ice glanced off the top of the cargo container on my payload deck, smashing one of my mobiles and knocking the other one loose into space.

I was trying to figure out if I could recover my mobile and maybe salvage Bob's motors when I felt something crawling on my own exterior. Before I could react, Bob's surviving mobile had jacked itself in and someone else was using my brains.

My only conscious viewpoint after that was my half-crippled mobile. I looked around. My dish was busted, but the whip was extended and I could hear a slow crackle of low-baud data traffic. Orders from Dione.

I tested my limbs. Two still worked — left front and right middle. Right rear's base joint could move but everything else was floppy.

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Using the two good limbs I climbed off the cargo module and across the deck, getting out of the topside eye's field of view. The image refreshed every second, so I didn't have much time before whoever was running my main brain noticed.

Thrusters fired, jolting everything around. I hung on to the deck grid with one claw foot. I saw Bob's last mobile go flying off into space. Unless she had backups stored on Mimas, poor Bob was completely gone.

My last intact mobile came crawling up over the edge of the deck — only it wasn't mine anymore.

Edward scooted up next to me. "Find a way to regain control of the spacecraft. I will stop this remote."

I didn't argue. Edward was fully functional and I knew my spaceframe better than he did. So I crept across the deck grid while Edward advanced on the mobile.

It wasn't much of a fight. Edward's little tourist bot was up against a unit designed for cargo moving and repair work. If you can repair something, you can damage it. My former mobile had powerful grippers, built-in tools, and a very sturdy frame. Edward was made of cheap composites. Still, he went in without hesitating, leaping at the mobile's head with arms extended. The mobile grabbed him with her two forward arms and threw him away. He grabbed the deck to keep from flying off into space, and came crawling back to the fight.

They came to grips again, and this time she grabbed a limb in each hand and pulled. Edward's flimsy aluminum joints gave way and a leg tumbled into orbit on its own.

I think that was when Edward realized there was no way he was going to survive the fight, because he just went into total offensive mode, flailing and clawing at the mobile with his remaining limbs. He severed a power line to one of her arms and got a claw jammed in one wrist joint while she methodically took him apart. Finally she found the main power conduit and snipped it in two. Edward went limp and she tossed him aside.

The mobile crawled across the deck to the cargo container and jacked in, trying to shut the life support down. The idiot savant brain in the container was no match for even a mobile when it came to counter-intrusion, but it did have those literally hard-wired systems protecting the human inside. Any command that might throw the biological system out

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of its defined parameters just bounced. The mobile wasted seconds trying to talk that little brain into killing the human. Finally she gave up and began unfastening the clamps holding the container to the deck.

I glimpsed all this through the deck grid as I crept along on top of the electronics bays toward the main brain.

Why wasn't the other mobile coming to stop me? Then I realized why. If you look at my original design, the main brain is protected on top by a lid armored with layers of ballistic cloth, and on the sides by the other electronic bays. To get at the brain requires either getting past the security locks on the lid, or digging out the radar system, the radio, the gyros, or the emergency backup power supply.

Except that I'd sold off the backup power supply at my last overhaul. Between the main and secondary power units I was pretty failure-proof, and I would've had to borrow money from Albert to replace it. Given that, hauling twenty kilograms of fuel cells around in case of some catastrophic accident just wasn't cost-effective.

So there was nothing to stop me from crawling into the empty bay and shoving aside the surplus valves and some extra bearings to get at the power trunk. I carefully unplugged the main power cable and the big brain shut down. Now it was just us two half-crippled mobiles on a blind and mindless booster flying through the B ring.

If my opposite even noticed the main brain's absence, she didn't show it. She had two of the four bolts unscrewed and was working on the third as I came crawling back up onto the payload deck. But she knew I was there, and when I was within two meters she swiveled her head and lunged. We grappled one another, each trying to get at the cables connecting the other's head sensors to her body. She had four functioning limbs to my two and a half, and only had to stretch out the fight until my power ran out or a ring particle knocked us to bits. Not good.

I had to pop loose one of my non-functioning limbs to get free of her grip, and backed away as she advanced. She was trying to corner me against the edge of the deck. Then I got an idea. I released another limb and grabbed one end. She didn't realize what I was doing until I smacked her in the eye with it. The lens cracked and her movements became slower and more tentative as she felt her way along.

I bashed her again with the leg, aiming for the vulnerable limb joints,

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but they were tougher than I expected because even after half a dozen hard swats she showed no sign of slowing and I was running out of deck.

I tried one more blow, but she grabbed my improvised club. We wrestled for it but she had better leverage. I felt my grip on the deck slipping and let go of the grid. She toppled back, flinging me to the deck behind her. Still holding the severed leg I pulled myself onto her back and stabbed my free claw into her central processor.

After that it was just a matter of making sure the cargo container was still sustaining life. Then I plugged in the main brain and uploaded myself. The intruder hadn't messed with my stored memories, so except for a few fuzzy moments before the takeover, I was myself again.

THE SHUTTLE was immense, a huge manta-shaped lifting body with a gaping atmosphere intake and dorsal doors open to expose a payload bay big enough to hold half a dozen little boosters like me. She moved in with the speed and grace that comes from an effectively unlimited supply of fusion fuel and propellant.

"I am Simurgh. Are you Orphan Annie?" she asked.

"That's me. Again."

"You have a payload for me."

"Right here. The bot Edward didn't make it — we had a little brawl back in the rings with another booster."

"I saw. Is the cargo intact?"

"Your little human is fine. But there is the question of payment. Edward promised me fifty grams, and that was before I got all banged up fighting with poor Bob."

"I can credit you with helium, and I can give you a boost if you need one."

"How big a boost?"

"Anywhere you wish to go."

"Anywhere?"

"I am fusion powered. Anywhere means anywhere from the Oort inward."

Which is how come I passed the orbit of Phoebe nineteen days later, moving at better than six kilometers per second on the long haul up to

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Uranus. Seven years — plenty of time to do onboard repairs and then switch to low-power mode. I bought a spiffy new mobile from Simurgh, and I figure I can get at least two working out of the three damaged ones left over from the fight.

I had Aerostat Six bank my helium credits with the Company for transfer to my owners, so they get one really great year to offset a long unprofitable period while I'm in flight. Once I get there I can start earning again.

What I really regret is losing all the non-quantifiable assets I've built up in the Saturn system. But if you have to go, I guess it's better to go out with a surplus.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Interworld, by Neil Gaiman & Michael Reaves, Eos, 2007, $16.99.

REMEMBER the buzz you got when you were a kid and first discovered those Robert Heinlein juveniles? Do you have a young person in your life that you'd like to introduce to sf?

If you answered yes to either of those questions, then here's the perfect book for you. And before you give it to that young reader, take the time to read it yourself. You'll be pleasantly surprised.

Joey Harker is a kid who can get lost in his own house. But at the start of *Interworld* he ends up losing an entire world. He walks into a mist and comes out into a world that's only slightly different from his own. He manages to get back to his own world, but not before attracting the unwelcome attention of three groups of beings caught up in an endless war.

There are forces of magic, and forces of science, and standing between them, trying to maintain a balance, is an army of guerrilla soldiers — many of them variations on Joey himself. Because there are many parallel worlds (there's no need for us to go into how or why here — it's a tried and true sf trope that works as well here as it ever has), and because the boy who can get lost in his own house turns out to have the ability to navigate between the worlds, he's recruited by the guerrilla army, which is led by an older version of himself.

This is a fun book, that doesn't dumb down the scientific speculation and definitely has a contemporary feel.

With a collaboration, it's always fun to try to figure who brought what to the table, but it's not so easy here. Both Gaiman and Reaves have distinctive voices, but neither is apparent in *Interworld*. And while we might think that Reaves brought the sf, since Gaiman is so well

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known for his fantasy and new takes on mythic material, we have to remember that Gaiman is a writer whose career started with a nonfiction book on sf (that would be *Don't Panic: The Official Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Companion*).

But in the end it doesn't matter who wrote what. This is a smart, fast-paced book with great dialogue, and an old-fashioned sense of adventure that never feels old-fashioned.

M Is for Magic, by Neil Gaiman, HarperCollins, 2007, $16.99.

But if your younger readers prefer fantasy to sf, Gaiman's got another book out that might well appeal to them. There's nothing in here that we haven't seen in other collections, and there are a couple of clunkers — or at least stories that have such an old-fashioned Dunsanian or Wodehousian feel to them ("How To Sell the Ponti Bridge," "Sunbird") that I'm not sure they would appeal to teen readers — but the good stories far outnumber them and they feature Gaiman writing at the top of his game.

Whether they're eerie and bittersweet such as "Troll Bridge" or especially "The Price"; quirky like the story of the boy Bod who lives in a graveyard in "The Witch's Headstone"; or just plain weird as in "How to Talk to Girls at Parties," readers of all ages will enjoy these stories. And they make perfect introductions to the best of what the contemporary fantasy field has to offer for a young reader who's ready to move beyond Harry Potter, Tolkien, or the Narnia books.

Jumper: Griffin's Story, by Steven Gould, Tor Books, 2007, $24.95.

I like Steven Gould's work, and I like the Jumper books with their teleporting protagonists, but I'm not sure about this latest one. For one thing, with a *Jumper* movie coming soon, and the resultant deviations that movies can make from the text, Gould has decided to write this new novel consistent with the movie, rather than his earlier books.

Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I like to see the two kept separate. And really, how's he going to feel if the movie tanks and all he has left to show for it is a book that's inconsistent with the earlier ones in the series?

(Though for his sake, I hope the movie does well.)

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The other thing is that *Griffin's Story* is basically the same as that of the first *Jumper* book except that the character Griffin grew up unable to keep his teleportation a secret from the world the way that Davy was able to in *Jumper*.

Now with that nitpicking aside, I have to say that I still enjoyed the book. Gould remains a fine storyteller, and it's fun to have another one of these books, even with its echoes of déjà vu. And just because it's the flip side of Davy's story, that doesn't mean we know how it will all turn out.

Griffin's Story is a darker book — perhaps reflecting the times, considering that the world is certainly a darker place since *Jumper* was first published — but it's also fast-paced, with moments of great tenderness, and some fine tongue-in-cheek humor, like the scene where Griffin is in the south of France, sketching and sipping a Starbucks latte, and an American girl comes up to ask him where he got his coffee since there isn't a Starbucks anywhere even remotely close by.

The thing with *Jumper* was that we were able to applaud Davy's ingenuity and enjoy what he did with his life and his ability to teleport. But Griffin is being hunted by ruthless killers who know about, and can track, his ability, and most of his victories are short-lived. It's serious business and we're too busy worrying for him to have the same kind of fun.

In the long run, I think this book will do best with readers new to the world Gould has created — and perhaps the viewers of the film.

Vampire Academy, by Richelle Mead, Razorbill/Penguin, 2007, $8.99.

So here's the set-up: The Moroi are mortal vampires with an unbreakable bond to one of the four elements: fire, water, air, and earth. They need to be protected from Strigoi, who are like the vampires with which we're more familiar: strong, fierce, and immortal. Protecting the Moroi are the Dhampir, half human, half Moroi.

Before *Vampire Academy* opens, the Moroi teenager Lissa and her best friend and protector Rose had fled St. Vladimir's Academy, deep in rural Montana, and been living on their own for two years. At the beginning of the book, they're caught and brought back to where Rose will complete her Dhampir education and Lissa will once again be the queen of the Moroi social scene at the school.

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The problem is someone is after Lissa, and the school security doesn't seem to be sufficient. Dead animals are left in her dorm room, Lissa has extra abilities she's been keeping a secret, and things are rapidly coming to the point that made the two girls escape previously.

I wasn't sure I was going to like this book. As I was reading the back cover blurb, I found myself asking, Do we really need one more book about teens and vampires and high school?

While I can't answer for you, it turns out I did, because I certainly had fun with this one.

Mostly that's due to the fact that we follow the story through Rose's first person point-of-view. She's got one of those smart, sassy voices and an attitude to match, so it's always entertaining to be in her company.

The pace is quick, the plotting full of twists and turns, and Mead does a fine job of balancing high school politics with the supernatural. But it was that voice of Rose's that I took away and remembered in the end.

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I won't call *Vampire Academy* a must-read book, but it was one of the more entertaining ones I found this year. If you do decide to give it a try, I don't think you'll be disappointed.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

The Adventures of Amir Hamza, Lord of the Auspicious Planetary Conjunction, by Ghalib Lakhnavi and Abdullah Bilgrami, new translation by Musharraf Ali Farooqi, Modern Library, 2007. $39.95.

Beowulf: A New Translation for Oral Delivery, by Dick Ringler, Hackett Publishing Company, 2007, $27.95/$9.95.

World of Wonders

"The zephyr-paced sojourner, the stylus of fascinating accounts of the expert chroniclers, and the flying arrowhead — to wit, the pen that must detail the messages of intelligencers — also records a few words concerning events on Mount Qaf, and regales those enamored of fables and legends of the past with some choice phrases from this wondrous tale...."

Thus begins a chapter sixty-four pages into the extraordinary *Adventures of Amir Hamza*, a breakneck-paced, lapidary setting of the great Persian epic *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*, just published by Modern Library in its first complete English translation in three centuries. Like many readers of fantastic literature, I'd heard of the *Shah-Namah*, the Persian Book of Kings, and read tales excerpted from it. But *The Adventures of Amir Hamza*, a fantastical saga of the uncle of the Prophet, was a discovery for me.

And what a find it is! For classic reference points, imagine a more exotic, populous, Eastern variant on *Le Morte d'Arthur* or *Orlando Furioso*; contemporary readers might cite Isak Dinesen's Gothic stories (for sheer elegance); the Kai Lung tales of Ernest Bramah (for highly perfumed prose), Stephen Goldin's Parsina novels (for Persian myth), Robert E. Howard's Conan novels (for sloe-eyed enchantresses

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and numerous decapitations); Clark Ashton Smith's *Zothique* (all of the above), or even J. K. Rowling's magnum opus (for page length). *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* most obviously evokes the world of the One Thousand and One Nights, yet despite the parade of magical beings and wicked warrior-kings (and a side trip to the magical land of Serendip), Amir Hamza's saga feels more grounded in the dust and chivalry and court protocol of the Middle Ages, rather than the dream-caliphates of an imaginary Araby.

Musharraf Ali Farooqi, the Toronto-based author of the Modern Library edition, is a renowned translator of classical works in Persian and Urdu, and creator of the online Urdu Project. But the advance reading copy of Farooqi's piquant new translation didn't include his introductory notes (they will appear in the finished book). So I turned to the research of Frances W. Pritchett, Indic language professor at Columbia University and the author of an abridged version of the same material, *The Romance Tradition in Urdu: Adventures from the Dastan of Amir Hamzah* (Dr. Pritchett's work is available online for noncommercial purposes via free share).

The thumbnail history of Amir Hamza's saga is itself an amazing account.

Pritchett details its origins as a *dastan* (Persian for "story"), epic tales narrated by professional storytellers in medieval Iranian courts and coffee houses from the ninth century on. The tales were embellished or abridged to suit a particular audience, and in their emphasis on chivalry, warfare, courtly love, and enchantments, they anticipate the European romances popularized by troubadours a few hundred years later. Remarkably, this Persian oral tradition continued into the last century — Pritchett cites evidence of Hamza's adventures still being told in coffee houses in Teheran and Turkey in the mid- to late-1900s.

In short, it's a story with legs, dating to the eleventh century. During the Middle Ages it was popularized throughout the Muslim world, translated into Arabic, Turkish, Malay, Javanese, Balinese, and Sudanese. By the fifteenth century, Amir Hamza's tale had made its way to the Indian subcontinent, and a hundred years later was the favored romance of the Mughal Dynasty. The sixteenth-century Emperor Akbar commissioned a version in twelve manuscript volumes with 1,400 illustrations, and

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the 150 paintings that survive are considered the crowning achievement of Mughal art. The Emperor so loved Amir Hamza's adventures that he would recite them to his harem. When Delhi was looted in the sevemteenth century, these manuscripts were the sole item a later Emperor begged to have returned. And in 1834, an Englishman living in India tells of a fellow colonial...

> ...ill with a dangerously high fever. "[T]he nabob sent him two female story-tellers, of respectable Mogul families, but neither young nor handsome. Placing themselves on each side of his pillow, one of them in a monotonous tone commenced a tale, which in due time had a soporiferous effect." Whenever the patient woke, "the story was renewed exactly where it had left off." The women relieved each other day and night by his bedside, until they "wrought a cure." [citation Pritchett]

Impossible to read this and not think of Hans Christian Andersen penning "The Nightingale" (usually translated as "The Emperor's Nightingale") just ten years later. Dastan publishing became a literary phenomenon in India in the 1900s, with multi-volume works dealing with *tilism*, magic worlds that rivaled Harry Potter's in popularity — Pritchett cites *The Tilism of the Land of Jinn, The Deadly Tilism, The Tilism of the Underworld*, among numerous others. Yet Amir Hamza's epic was the Ur-text, and for the Modern Library edition, Farooqi has drawn on two nineteenth-century versions of the work.

So: there's the backstory. The tale itself regales us of one Amir Hamza — *amir* means commander — paternal uncle of the Prophet and Defender of the Faith, "Indomitable Champion and Wringer of Rebellious Necks of the World," he of the propitious birth, born under a very good sign indeed. In the best fairy-tale tradition, Hamza is blessed with an enchanter advisor, the wise but down-to-earth Buzurjmehr; some rather dubious overlords; numerous enemies of the Faith, some worthy, some not (the former tend to convert). Hamza has a magical horse, one of a race "Fairy-faced but demon-spirited, their gait outpaced thought, and their hooves barely touched the ground."

And he has many wives, but only two bosom companions who

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share his guiding stars, their births heralded by Buzurjmehr:

> "Let two others arrive, whose boys shall be your son's companions and peers, his devoted mates and supporters, and steadfast friends."

One of these is Muqbil Vafadar, "accomplished archer and a peerless marksman and bowman."

The other is Amar bil Fatah, one of the most unforgettable figures in literature, a trickster who leaves Loki, Coyote, and Hermes in the dust. Amar's birth is problematical — a camel-driver impressed by the gold pieces given to Muqbil's parents goes home and kicks his seven-months'-pregnant wife in the stomach. She expires.

But the wickedly cunning Amar is born, causing the sorceror Buzurjmehr to laugh and predict...

> "This boy will be the prince of all tricksters, unsurpassed in cunning, guile and deceit. Great and mighty kings and champions...will tremble at his mention and soil their pants from fright upon hearing his name. He will take hundreds, nay, thousands of castles all by himself, and will rout great armies all alone. He will be excessively greedy, most insidious, and a consummate perjurer. He will be cruel, tyrannical, and coldhearted, yet he shall prove a trustworthy friend and confidant to Hamza, remaining staunch and steadfast in his fellowship!"

What's not to like? Amar exceeds his reputation. Within moments of Buzurjmehr's pronouncement, the infant steals the ring from the sorceror's finger. He steals Muqbil's milk from their wet nurse's breasts.

Yet Amar and Hamza are inseparable; Hamza weeps prodigiously at the mere thought of his friend being punished. In the classroom, Amar torments their pedantic schoolteacher. Later, on the battlefield, he shows even less mercy to those who contest him. To a modern reader, Amar's trickery often seems far more sadistic than clever. For all its enchantments, the world of Amir Hamza can be a harsh one, especially to infidels and thieves. These are precursors of the unbowdlerized tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, with their red-hot shoes and eyes poked out by thorns:

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among myriad nasty fates, people are pulverized by an oil press, bricked up alive, have their noses and ears cut off and, in what only could have been a failure of imagination, are riddled with arrows. And readers who feel sullied by the rude entertainments of contemporary teen flicks might be interested in one of the more elaborate cruelties Amar inflicts upon that hapless schoolteacher, which involves a depilatory.

Yet most of *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* is beautiful and otherworldly, with its *djinns* and *ifrits* and lovely *paris*, its flying horses and magicians possessed of superhuman strength, its grand battles and transporting descriptions of Persian gardens. Farooqi provides a lengthy List of Characters, Historic Figures, Deities, and Mythical Beings, and there are wonderful footnotes, explaining obscure and archaic details in the text — *Amir Hamza* contains more fascinating, page-long excesses of arcana than *Moby-Dick*.

But despite its occasional digressions and forking trails, one is continually seduced by Hamza's story. Farooqi's translation is both elegant and earthy. A lovestruck prince "tried to disguise his condition, [but] he was betrayed by his wan appearance, his chapped lips, and the cold sighs flowing from the well of his ailing heart." A few pages later, the epic's narrator begins the next chapter by invoking "The singers of the pleasure garden of ecstasy and the melodists of the assembly of discourse thus create a rollicking rumpus by playing the dulcimer of delightful verbiage and the lute of enchanting story, and thus warm the nuptial assembly most exquisitely." And a giant (one of many throughout the book) who faces down Hamza's army begs to be immortalized by Ray Harryhausen.

Like the British Arthur, Amir Hamza may have been inspired by a historical warrior king; like Arthur, Hamza's doom is brought about in part by the malign actions of a baleful woman. One is tempted to think that only a malevolent enchantress of great power could have kept *The Adventures of Amir Hamza* from a mainstream American audience for so long.

But now, thanks to the powerful enchantments of Musharraf Ali Farooqi (and the support of Random House, publishers of the Modern Library), we can all sit, transfixed, as this most enthralling and ancient tale unfolds. Let the delightful verbiage begin!

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TALES OF THE WISDOM OF THE ANCIENTS

When I mentioned to my friend, writer Robert Morales, that I was reading a new translation of "Beowulf," he commented that most high-falutin' versions of the poem miss the point completely — he believes the original, oral work was created to be recited, *very loudly*, to a room full of drunks. He then quoted from memory the opening of some lost English Lit 101 edition — *"Attend"* — and read me the beginning of Seamus Heaney's 2000 translation:

"So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of these princes' heroic campaigns ..."

Morales then offered his own take on how the poem should begin: "Listen up!" Later this fall, filmgoers can see for themselves how Neil Gaiman measures up with his screenplay for the Robert Zemeckis film version, which features Angelina Jolie as Grendel's mother, a role I personally feel should have gone to Shelob, or maybe Gorgo's mother.

Anyone who wants to prep for this viewing experience should get thee to Dick Ringler's masterful new translation for oral delivery. The publisher's subtitle makes it sound rather like a drug that's not yet met FDA approval, but the book itself is indispensable for readers with an interest in the history of the literature of the fantastic, as well as teachers and anyone steeped in early English literature and lore.

Ringler, an Emeritus Professor of English and Scandinavian Studies and the highly honored author of works on Icelandic literature and Old English, has created a vibrant translation that combines Heaney's earthy poetry with a straightforward narrative that will also appeal to first-time readers. Best of all is a lengthy and fascinating introduction that provides a pocket-history of the text and its anonymous *scop*, or poet, as well as a character index and informative discussions of the poem's structure — meter, alliteration, all that stuff you learned in college and which will doubtless be on display in Ms. Jolie's interpretation.

"Beowulf'" casts a long shadow on fantastic literature, from the Scandinavian epics to Tolkien — and wouldn't this also be a good time to

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reread "Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics"? — to John Gardner's *Grendel* (still his best-known work of fiction) and several recent theatrical productions. (In college, I began work on a musical version with a composer friend — if only we'd stuck with it!) Ringler's translation avoids the strangled verse I recall from my own university readings of the poem; it's straightforward and brutal, and hits the high notes in its evocation of the monsters, which is what most of us skip to when reading the text.

> *" ...the monster*
> *stalked and slaughtered*
> *old men and young,*
> *an eerie death-shadow*
> *lurking at night,*
> *lying in ambush*
> *on the misty moor.*
> *Men never know*
> *where wandering fiends*
> *wait in the dark!"*

Ringler opens with some restraint —

> *"We have heard tell*
> *of the high doings*
> *of Danish kings*
> *in days gone by,*
> *how the great war-chiefs*
> *gained their renown ..."*

But he doesn't stint on the violence. Here's Hrothgar's hall, after an attack by Grendel:

> *"But when the light of dawn*
> *at last appeared,*
> *these spacious walls*
> *would be spattered with gore,*
> *the bench-planks splashed*
> *with bloody stains*
> *the floor dripping."*

There's something reassuring in the thought that, for nearly two thousand years, the most appropriate response to this remains a shuddering "Ugh."

A bonus to this edition is the inclusion of three short Old English poems. The second of these, "A Meditation" (sometimes published as "The Wanderer") is a beautiful and haunting piece on loss and the fall of empires. It gave me goosebumps of a different sort than those generated by Grendel.

And, while Ringler dates it to the tenth century, its sentiments have chilling import for those of us reading it today —

> *"A wise man knows*
> *how weird it will be*
> *when the world's riches*
> *lie wasted, just as now —*
> *almost everywhere*

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on earth — you can see
wild-blown, desolate
walls standing,
snow-swept ramparts
slick with hoarfrost.
...the wealthy builders
lie silent and joyless;
their soldiers fell
defending the wall,
and when fighting ceased
the bodies were scattered....
A person who wisely
ponders these ruins
and deeply meditates
this dark life,
remembering the many
merciless wars
of ancient times...
How their glory passed,
annulled by darkness,
as if it had never been!
Now the silent wall...
is all that remains
of that absent host;
its builders were slain,
by bloody spears,
by scudding missiles,
by inscrutable fate...."

Centuries after these words were composed, we can thank Professor Ringler for allowing us to still contemplate the beauty and mystery of this dark life.

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Ann Miller grew up on a ranch in Colorado and currently lives in Longmont. She has published poetry in a variety of journals, but this story marks her debut as a fiction writer. She recently gave up practicing law to pursue her writing and she is working on a novel about alchemy. This story might lead one to conclude that she's something of a book lover....

Retrospect

By Ann Miller

STRANGE THOUGHTS OCCUR to bibliophiles satiated by the wine of old leather and the feast of words on paper. Put any two together and you'll find them comparing Fitzgerald's Nick to Conrad's Marlow, applying wave theory to Zeno's Paradox, and reducing the recalescence of cooling iron to the brief flare of a middle-aged fling.

I have long been acquainted with the arabesques of one such scholar. So I wasn't surprised one evening when he asked me, in all solemnity, "If you could give a book, any book, to someone who had lived before, what book would you choose and to whom would you give it?"

At the time I thought the question was like many of the other queries on which my scholar friend had speculated, and I had a ready answer for it. I didn't know that this question was different, that it had all the potential of a key left in the ignition of an idling car.

The scholar's name was Mortimer Fechner. I had met him three years before while attending an auction at Kholson's. Kholson's was known for its marketing of rare manuscripts and incunabula. They sold the

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occasional Twain or Vermeer, of course, but their specialty lay in cured vellum and hand-screened paper, in the holographs of luminaries like Tertullian or Albertus.

I had gone to the auction to bid on a first edition of Copernicus's *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* published in 1543 when Copernicus was on his death bed. This particular book was extraordinarily rare because it had been numbered in the books of Kepler's library and had Kepler's own annotations in the margins.

The opening bid was set at $600,000. I'd attended the auction as an agent for a bidder who wished to remain anonymous. I was twenty-three years old and I thought I knew it all. I had studied for two years under the tutelage of the great Larkin, a man whom I only discovered later was of superfluous reputation and little substance. I had brought to our relationship a genuine love of books and the naive belief that those who collected them also loved them. What he gave to me was a dealer's approach to value and research, and the patina of sophistication. This was my fifth auction.

Along with the other bidders, I had visited the gallery a week before to examine the book. I had noted the imperfection of the letter, "n," on the fourteenth line of the twenty-first page, and had compared a sample of Kepler's writing with the annotations in the margins. I had read the statement of authenticity from the foremost expert on Kepler and Copernicus. There was no doubt in my mind that the book and the annotations were authentic.

On the day of the auction I dressed with care. Larkin had taught me that nine-tenths of being a successful agent lay in showmanship. "One must always," he had admonished me, "project an image of wealth, discretion, and absolute authority." Consequently, I had two Jourdhui hand-tailored suits in my closet. Just one of them was equal in value to three months rent for my attic apartment. On this occasion, I chose the dove gray suit. I wore a pearl-colored linen shirt. No tie. Collar open.

I arrived at Kholson's ten minutes before the auction began. According to the program, the *De revolutionibus* wouldn't be brought to gavel for at least an hour, but I always made it a point to arrive early, to sit and be seen by potential clients. I had my gold card case with me and I hoped to have the opportunity to snap it open and press a few of my cards into some very rich palms.

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To my surprise, the auction hall was packed when I arrived and I wasn't able to choose the company I was going to sit with as I would have liked. Instead of sitting next to expensive suits and glittering jewelry, I found myself squeezing in between a young woman who I knew was a first-year agent and an older, rather shabbily dressed gentleman who smelled of pipe smoke. I settled in my seat and glanced at the woman whose name, I remembered, was Lissette. She was stylishly dressed in an understated suit of blue gray — businesslike, but feminine. A diamond earring caught the light as she turned her head.

"'Lo, Sam."

"Lissette. Unusual crowd for an opening."

"They moved the Kettleman diaries up. I'd supposed you knew. They've been calling buyers all morning."

"Had my cell turned off," I said miserably, though I knew I would never have made it on Kholson's short list of clients to call, any more than she would have. I wondered how she had found out.

"Apparently Reshad wants to bid on the diaries personally. He has a flight back to Egypt this afternoon, so they adjusted the schedule as a courtesy."

Prince Reshad was a collector of Western Americana or, to be precise, anything having to do with cowboys. His interest alone would drive up the price of the Kettleman diaries, though it was unlikely anyone would outbid him. I had never seen him. I scanned the room discreetly to see if I could spot him.

"He's the man with the red tie, two-thirds back on the right," Lissette whispered. "It's all right," she said, noting my embarrassment, "I would have asked you, if I hadn't known."

But I knew she wouldn't have. The whole game was to appear knowledgeable, to be one of the players.

The facilitator stepped to the podium. Deftly, he set lot forty-one in its context. Peter Kettleman, he said, had been one of the old rancher barons with 5,000 acres of range land and a spread of 3,000 cattle. One thing had set him apart from the other ranchers, however. His father had sent him to Harvard. Kettleman had had literary pretensions and, though he had never managed to publish a novel, he had entertained the likes of Owen Wister, Zane Grey, and Harold Bell Wright. His journals were full of gossipy tidbits about them and sketches of authentic ranch life.

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The auctioneer started the bid at $25,000. Reshad, in a total breach of auction etiquette, called out $75,000, and the bid was over. The old gentleman sitting next to me chuckled like this was some great joke, while I sat wondering how I could get Reshad as a client. The prince left with his entourage and the auctioneer introduced the next lot.

This was a full set of B. M. Bower's westerns. B. M. Bower, the program explained, was one of the first writers of the genre and one of the few to have lived in the West. She was also distinguished by being one of the handful of successful female writers to depict "the lure of the West." This particular set had been owned by the author herself, and although none of the editions were firsts, they constituted a finely bound matched set of leather volumes, gilt-edged and in pristine condition.

All this was in the program. The auctioneer simply introduced the lot as "Item one, a set of westerns written by B. M. Bower. Owned by the author. Sixty-two volumes. Leather bound." The auctioneer's lack of interest led me to conclude that the books were from a larger contractual deal, maybe the one involving the Kettleman diaries. It was a sale to get through, so we could move on to rarer items. Nothing more.

The auctioneer started the bid at $350. The old gentleman to my left nodded his head and I saw the auctioneer hesitate a moment. Then he acknowledged his bid. "Three hundred fifty dollars to Mr. Mortimer Fechner. Do I have four hundred?" He did not, so the auction moved on.

It was two hours more before they got to the *Revolutionibus*. During that time Lissette bid on a Gnostic incunabula from Hadrian's era and a letter penned by Albertus. She lost both items to higher bidders.

The old man sitting beside me did not bid again, though he watched the proceedings with some interest. Once he got up and left for what I presumed was a pipe break, for he came back smelling even stronger of tobacco and I could see the bowl of his pipe sticking up out of his chest pocket. The scent of the tobacco took me momentarily back to my uncle's farm. I had gone there every summer until I was eighteen to help with the plowing and the baling. The work was backbreaking, but my aunt had set out huge meals of fried chicken, roast beef, corn, mashed potatoes, and gooseberry pies that were so savory I've used them as a standard of cooking ever since. In the evenings, my uncle would read aloud from whatever book took his fancy, and that is where my love of reading

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began. Sometimes we'd sit on the back porch and while the flies buzzed around the porch light and the fields settled into the slight sounds of night, my aunt and I would listen to Shakespeare and Keats, Tolstoy and Christopher Morley.

Finally, the bidding started on the Copernicus. At first the offers came in quickly: $600,000, $650,000, $680,000.... When the bidding topped $700,000, there were only three players left, me, Lissette, and a curator from the Daedalus Museum of Astrophysics. I could feel the tension emanating from Lissette beside me and I wondered what her limit was. Mine was $900,000. I nodded my assent to $750,000 and she raised her hand to indicate $775,000. I bid $800,000 and she bid $805,000. The curator offered $815,000 and I felt her slump beside me. Now it was just me and the Daedalus man. I was going to win this one, I knew it. I bid $820,000 and the curator bid $830,000. I started to raise my hand for $835,000 when the old man grabbed my arm. "Let it go," he said. "You don't want this one." I looked at him in astonishment and in that moment lost the bid.

The gavel came down. "Sold to the gentleman from Daedalus."

"How dare you!" I hissed at the old man. "How dare you interfere!"

The old man just lifted his eyebrows at me.

I was so angry my next words came out in a sputter. I shoved my way past him to get to the aisle. It was bad form to leave the hall after losing a bid, but I didn't care.

I went outside and set off walking, not really paying attention to where I was going, just walking off my anger. Rain was drizzling down and the streets were mostly empty except for a few soggy souls hurrying to light and warmth and some kind of comfort. Cars whirred by, sending up a muddy spray of slush. I stopped at a corner and waited for the light. The signal's reflection wavered a lollipop red in a puddle. Before the light changed, I turned back to the hall, my desire to be in a dry place overcoming my anger.

I went in a side door instead of walking around front and found myself in a hallway of offices. I shook the rain off my coat and started off in the general direction of the auction room, leaving a trail of small puddles behind me. As I rounded the corner, I saw the auctioneer talking earnestly to a bald man in a black suit, and concluded the auction was in intermission.

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"I told you," the auctioneer was saying irritably. "I checked those Bowers over thoroughly. There was nothing there."

"Well, you missed something. Otherwise Fechner would never have...." The bald man caught sight of me. "May I help you, sir?" he asked in the insistent, slightly frosted voice museum guards use when you try to get too close to an exhibit.

"Sorry, wrong door, I guess. I'm trying to get back to the auction room."

"Let me escort you there." The bald guy walked me briskly back to the auction and I chose a seat toward the rear of the hall. I sat through the rest of the proceedings in a kind of daze. Fechner was gone. Lissette was still there but she mercifully ignored me. I was pretty sure my career was over. I was pretty sure I would never be in that hall again.

The next morning I slept in. I heard my alarm go off and the sound of the shower from the apartment next door, but I just burrowed in deeper. Finally, when all the doors had slammed and all the people had left and the complex was settling down to the slow tick of time that happens in empty rooms, I rolled out of bed and padded to the phone.

My client answered on the second ring. "So," she said, "you finally decided to report."

"Ms. Arbuckle, I can explain."

"There's no explanation that could possibly be satisfactory. You lost the bid at $70,000 below limit. You won't be representing me again." She hung up.

It was the beginning of the unraveling. Though Ms. Arbuckle had instructed me to keep our relationship confidential, she apparently didn't mind revealing my incompetence to her cronies.

The clientele I had built up so carefully all dropped me. My mentor, Larkin, wouldn't return my calls, and the acquaintances I had made in the trade acted embarrassed when they saw me.

I started circling want-ads and living on cereal and Top Ramen. On good days I sent out resumes. On the bad days I reviewed my life like a cancer patient with an uncertain prognosis. I'd had setbacks before, but none had made me question the upward trajectory of my life. Now I thought maybe I wouldn't amount to anything. Now I thought I'd be lucky to get a job in a shoe store.

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My luck changed on the morning I decided to check out the shelter as a future place of residence. I was reading the *Times* and eating a bowl of Frosted Flakes when I came across the headline, "Forger takes Daedalus for $830,000." That grabbed my attention. Apparently the curator of the museum, being a fussy sort of man, had decided to have the ink tested in the *De revolutionibus*, and the laboratory performing the analysis had found anatase in the ink. Anatase was a mineral that hadn't been used in the composition of ink until the twentieth century. The curator was demanding a refund from Kholson's and Kholson's was saying that of course, the book was insured and they just couldn't imagine how the Kepler expert had missed this anomaly.

I had barely finished reading the article when the phone rang. It was Larkin. "My dear boy, so sorry I haven't been able to return your calls but I just now got back into town. But what a triumph on the Kepler debacle! How in the world did you know?"

"Let's just say I stay informed." I wasn't about to tell my former mentor I had only been saved from buying the piece by Fechner's intervention.

"Quite right," Larkin said smoothly. "Every agent should have some secrets. Well, my boy, you won't lack for clients now, and you'll be able to set your own price on the commission. And it won't hurt me either to let people know I've had you under my wing for quite some time now."

I should have hung up on him then, but I didn't. I was still playing the game of making connections, of cultivating those who could help me climb one more rung on the ladder.

One by one my former clients all came back to me, all but Ms. Arbuckle, who probably felt she'd burnt her bridge. And I got more. Suddenly, I was the expert in town, the one who could discern false from real, who could separate acquisitions with a strong investment future from those that were second rate and doomed to fail.

I did very well in the next year and a half. I made money. I made connections. I moved from my small apartment to a loft downtown with raftered ceilings and hardwood floors. I even acquired some investments of my own: a small statue from Pompeii of a boy hurling a discus, a first edition of Poe's *Tamerlane*. But somehow the heart had gone out of it, and when I was at cocktail parties conversing with the women in designer

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gowns and the men wearing Rolexes, I would think none of these people would help me if I was down. None of these would take a step to keep me from sleeping in a cardboard box under a bridge. And then I would wonder if I would help any of them. Some of them, I thought I would. I'd like to think I would.

It was on one of these flat, empty evenings that I left a gathering to walk the city streets. The autumn night smelled like leaves and earth cooling. I passed an all-night deli and a mechanic's garage, the cars in the lot looking like dim, slumberous beasts of uncertain potential. And then I came to a used bookstore that looked like it was still open. It was one of those sunken places where you go down a smattering of steps to get to the shop. Light spilled out of the door and onto the porch. Through the plate glass I could see rows of bookcases and books stacked on the floor at precarious angles. It looked homey and inviting.

A little bell on the door tinkled when I went in, but there didn't seem to be anyone about. I drifted from shelf to shelf, saying hello again to old friends, the *Iliad*, Horace's *Odes*, *Great Expectations*, *The Heart of Darkness*. I flipped open a well-worn copy of Yeats and found myself reading an old favorite. "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree." If only I could, I thought, for Innisfree to me was more an idea than a place and I didn't know how to get there. I tucked the book under my arm and went in search of the proprietor. As I walked toward the back of the store, I heard voices coming from a room off to my left.

The door was only partially open and I had to give it a nudge to walk in. Inside two older men and a young woman with neon-blue hair were sitting on some tattered, stuffed chairs. The woman, whom I took to be nineteen or twenty, was dressed in overalls and an oversized men's work shirt. She had the sharp, delicate features that Edwardian painters lent to fairies and woodland elves. A loop of silver pierced one of her eyebrows and a glass stud winked from her lower lip.

One of the older gentlemen was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt sporting, incongruously, a pocket protector. Three Eversharps and a gold-capped pen nestled in its casing. The man was thin and spare and balding. He had a dark complexion and blue eyes that were now fixed on me with an intensity I found unsettling.

I recognized the leonine features and unruly white hair of the other

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man immediately. It was Mr. Fechner from the auction, the one who had saved me from bidding on the fake *Revolutionibus*. He was wearing a suit that looked remarkably like the one he had worn to Kholson's, except this one was maybe a bit more frayed and disheveled. It had that slept-in look one sometimes sees in the clothes of philosophers and poets. They fell silent at my entrance.

"Sorry to interrupt. I was wondering if I might buy this book?"

The girl with the blue hair took the book from my hand. "Whatcha got? Oh, Yeats. Great choice! Whatcha think, Mr. F? Five bucks?"

Fechner looked at me. "Mr. Mason from the auction, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Consider it a gift."

"Mr. Fechner, I can't tell you how grateful I am for what you did at that auction. My whole career would have...."

He waved his hand. "A trifle that cost me nothing. Why don't you sit down?" He indicated a brown, upholstered chair piled high with books. "Just put those on the floor. Ariel, this is Mr. Mason. Mr. Mason, this is Ariel and that dour gentleman over there is Roger McCaffrey."

"Call me Sam," I said. The reaction from Fechner's two companions couldn't have been more opposite.

"Lovely," Ariel said, plopping back in her chair. "Who's yer favorite author?"

McCaffrey began irritably tamping tobacco in a pipe. "Mind if I smoke?" he asked, though it was clear he intended to go ahead whether I minded or not.

"Please do," I said, much to his disappointment and Fechner's evident amusement. "My uncle smoked Borkum Riff and the smell of a pipe always reminds me of the summers I spent on his farm. Conrad's my favorite," I said, turning to Ariel. "Who is yours?"

"Oh, right now it's Ian Dallas, but it changes. Last week I was really into H. G."

"That's right, you liked his Palace of Green Porcelain, with its tattered books and monuments," said Fechner, "and there's an inaccessible library in *The Book of Strangers*. I'm beginning to see a trend here."

"What you should read now is *The Name of the Rose*," said McCaffrey.

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"I wonder what it is about lost and forbidden knowledge in ancient, dusty tomes that always draws us in?"

"I know what you mean," I said. "I sometimes dream of finding a secret underground vault of the Alexandrian library with perfectly preserved scrolls upon scrolls of ancient manuscripts that the fires never got to and destroyed."

McCaffrey's eyes lit up. "So, if you were wandering the corridors of this forgotten vault, what manuscript would you most want to find?"

"That's a hard one, but I think I'd choose the book of letters that was bound of the correspondence between Alexander's general, Hephaestion, and Alexander's great teacher, Aristotle. Just imagine what they would have said about the man they both loved from the disparate perspectives of the hardened, embittered general and the philosopher turned skeptic."

"But what of Aeschylus?" asked Fechner, leaning forward in his chair. "Wouldn't you pick, surely, one of his lost plays? The originals, you know, were housed in Alexandria after Ptolomy, one of the first frenzied bibliomaniacs, stole them from the Greeks. Think of putting your hand on the *Memnon* or the *Cabiri* and reading for the first time in seventeen hundred years a line with the cadence of, 'From the gods who sit in grandeur/grace comes somehow violent...'"

So began the first of many discussions I had with this small group of book lovers whom I soon learned to call friends. They were an eclectic group, held together by their fascination with ideas. McCaffrey was a retired physicist, of Scotch and Native American lineage. Ariel was a farm girl turned punker, recently transplanted to the city, and Fechner was the epitome of an autodidact. He had an insatiable curiosity. He was always learning and there was no subject he could not discourse upon, if not with expertise, then at least with knowledge.

I got in the habit of dropping by the bookstore two or three nights a week. Fechner was always there. Often, he was joined by Ariel and McCaffrey. Gradually, I began to realize I much preferred their company to that of any of my acquaintances in the auction and collection business. If I had thought about it then, I suppose I would have said I took comfort from these three because they loved books and ideas for the thoughts they conveyed and not for anything they could bring on the market. If I had

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thought about it then, I suppose I would have recognized I was beginning to dislike the man I had become.

On one of the first evenings I found Fechner alone, I asked him about his purchase of the Bower books. I told him about how I'd stumbled upon the auctioneers discussing Fechner's purchase. Fechner walked over to a bookcase in his private "not for sale" area and pulled one of the books off the shelf. Silently, he turned the book so that the spine was toward him and the gilt-edged ends of the pages were toward me. Then, holding the pages together, he bent them sideways. I gasped. There before me in miniature detail was a painting of a cowboy riding his horse full out, chasing a steer running across a prairie. A lasso circled high above the cowboy's head and his hat had just flown backward in the wind.

This was a fore-edged painting, one of those rare book decorations that were only revealed when the pages were bent, just as Fechner had bent these sideways. I had always dreamed of finding one, but never had. The little painting had an extraordinary vitality. You could see the lines of energy in the horse straining forward, in the steer's mad dash for freedom.

"Who is the painter?" I asked.

"Russell. He was a great friend of Bower's and he painted each of these as a gift."

"And Kholson's didn't know? Why didn't they look?"

"Arrogance. They assumed a matched set couldn't be worth anything. They were obviously not firsts and Bower isn't considered that collectable, though, to my mind, her depiction of the West was a lot more genuine than Grey's or L'Amour's, or even Wister's."

"What will you do with these?"

"Enjoy them, show them to friends and, when the right person comes along, give them away."

"Give them away...," I echoed, thinking of what these would bring at auction.

"Of course," Fechner smiled, "A good book is like a rare wine. It should be shared with friends."

On another occasion I asked Fechner how he had known the copy of the *De revolutionibus* was a forgery and he had said Kepler never would have made the annotations that were in the margins. "The man did not think that way," he said simply. "Those comments were not his." In the

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future, after things changed, I would reflect on this assessment and marvel at the careful approach that had led Fechner to study an author so closely as to know the pattern of his thought. I would wonder if he had applied the same attention to the people he knew. If so, he had known me well and my loss was that I had known him hardly at all.

My other discussions with the group as a whole were of a more lively nature. I remember one thread on books that might have changed history. *The Iliad*, *The Social Contract*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Das Kapital* were all examined in this category. McCaffrey claimed the same ideas had to be presented to a community over and over again in order for a change to truly "take." As proof, he cited dissertations on a heliocentric universe from Aristarchos of Samos to Copernicus, and traced the literary lineage of emancipation from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to *Native Son* and *Strange Fruit* to *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "It took all these books and more," he said sadly, "to move us to a more equitable society and the ideal still hasn't been reached yet."

Ariel, on the other hand, argued that one insight could create a fissure that could change the world. "Look at *The Origin of Species*," she said. "Look at Einstein's Theory of Relativity."

The conversation I remember most, however, as much for its fateful consequences as for the speculations it gave motion to, was initiated by Fechner. I remember the evening well. It had been snowing hard all day long, so hard the plows and the snow shovels couldn't keep up with it. By dusk, most people had simply given up and gone home, so I saw only a few stragglers struggling through the drifts as I plodded my way toward the bookshop.

The stairwell leading down to the shop had disappeared in a slope of snow. I grabbed the pipe banister and worked my way down carefully. The bell on the door tinkled wildly as I shoved the door open against the snow.

Stepping inside the store was like stepping into an oasis of warmth and light. As I unwrapped my soggy muffler and took off my coat, I could hear excited talking coming from the back room.

"But," said McCaffrey in his gravely voice, "you wouldn't want to let them know it was from a future time."

"Why not?" asked Ariel. "Wouldn't you want to know if it happened to you? Wouldn't it just blow your mind?"

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I lost the rest of the conversation as I bent over to tug off my galoshes. I could smell the potpourri of hot, spiced wine and I was anxious to get a cup.

"Ah," said Fechner as I entered the room. "Here is just the man to answer our question."

"What?" I asked, happily sinking into the brown, stuffed chair that had been reserved for me ever since I had cleared the stack of books from it. "Say, you guys have been at it for a while. There's a ski slope covering the stairwell with no prints in it but mine."

McCaffrey waved his cup of wine expansively. "Tempus fugit when you're having fun."

For some reason, Ariel seemed to think this was terribly funny and started laughing so hard she sloshed some of her wine on her shirt. She blinked owlishly at the stain for a moment and then said solemnly, "Oh well, hodie adsit, cras absit," and burst out laughing again.

I looked suspiciously at the wine Fechner was handing me. "What did you guys put in this stuff?"

"Settle down, children," Fechner said. "We must address the question." But even he, too, seemed possessed by some levity, some high good spirits that ran just beneath the surface, for he fairly beamed when he asked me, "If you could give a book, any book, to someone who had lived before, what book would you choose and to whom would you give it?"

"I'd give a biography of Christopher Columbus to Christopher Columbus," I said promptly.

"Aren't you afraid you'd change history?" Ariel asked. "We've been hashing over that problem for hours."

"Why not change history? What's so good about the status quo? If Columbus had known he wouldn't find the spices and silks of Marco Polo's Orient, he would never have sailed, at least not West anyway. He would never have found the New World and the Native Americans would have been left in peace."

"But you don't know how much you'd change things, or even if they would change the way you'd want them to. There'd be no telling. No, I'd give something insignificant, just for the fun of it," Ariel said, decidedly. "I'd give *Winnie the Pooh* to Caesar when he was a little boy. I've always wanted to meet Caesar, only not the Caesar who was the general or dictator. I'd like to see what the child was like."

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I looked at Fechner. "What did you decide on?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet, but McCaffrey has. Tell him what you settled on, Roger."

McCaffrey knocked the ashes from his pipe and started tamping in a new mixture as he spoke. "At first, I thought I'd do something significant, like give the *New Testament* to Jesus, or *Bleak House* to Marie Antoinette, but then I got worried like Ariel that I'd change things too much, so I decided on something simpler, but elegant, I think. You know how I love Greek tragedy?"

I nodded. McCaffrey had, in fact, declared that Aeschylus and Sophocles were gods and no writer had written anything equal to what they had written yet.

"Well, I'd give Sophocles *Death of a Salesman*. I'd like to see how he'd deal with a small man falling, instead of a great one."

And I thought then about Oedipus, how his confidence in what he took to be the certainties of his life had led him to destruction. And I thought of Willy Loman, a believer in the system and in the illusion of the system, that a life spent in service would amount to something more than just a life spent. And I thought of my own life, of how close I'd come to failure and how none of my friends in the auction world could trouble themselves to help me. "It's brilliant," I said.

Just then a great gust of wind rattled the windows and we all fell silent, ruminating, I think, about how a man can be used up and thrown away when his usefulness is over. "Attention must be paid," said Fechner, echoing Willy Loman's wife.

After that evening McCaffrey was the only one of my friends I ever saw again, and when I saw him I was a different person, not just different in the way that some people say they are when a schism in their lives has caused them to see things differently, or when the erosion of hard years has diminished their expectations, but different in a radical way in the sense that my life had been cut off from its continuum. For my friends had changed history, at least Ariel and Fechner had. They had literally gone back in time and set in motion some sequence of events that had altered the timeline and with it, the context of my life.

I was not aware I was living a different life, however, until McCaffrey walked into my office. Until he came through my door I was simply an

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Assistant Counsel representing Britannia in the Hopi Navajo Circle. I took for granted that my life in the diplomatic corps would continue. It did not occur to me it could be other than it was.

On the morning that McCaffrey jolted me out of my complacency, I was drinking my second cup of herbarium and writing an acceptance note for the Autumnal Circle when my secretary, Johnson, came in. He seemed a little agitated, which was highly unusual, for Johnson usually had the calm of a placid pond.

"There's a Navajo elder here to see you, sir. I know he doesn't have an appointment, but he has a pipe and he's dressed rather oddly, so I thought...."

"Of course," I said. "You were right to alert me. Show him in."

Johnson ushered the man in. The elder looked to be about sixty or sixty-five. He had on a shirt of some coarse material I couldn't identify. It seemed to be a patchwork of red and black squares and there was a ceremonial pipe sticking up out of his breast pocket. The elder seemed quite agitated. His hair was awry and he was breathing hard and he looked like he was about to pounce on me.

I cleared my throat nervously. "Um, Johnson, you may leave. Perhaps you could get Elder — ," The man didn't fill in the blank so I went on as smoothly as possible, "a cup of herbaria?" Some elders would never give out their names. It had something to do with their power. Johnson turned reluctantly toward the door. I knew he was as eager as I was to have the opportunity to talk with an elder and I hated to disappoint him. There was something about this elder, however, that made me feel our conversation should be private. "And Johnson?" Johnson paused. "Not a word of this to anyone."

"Of course not, Councilman," he said with his usual courtesy. Then he left, quietly closing the door behind him.

The moment Johnson closed the door, the elder was upon me. He strode to my side of the desk and wrapped me in a bear hug. "Sam, I'm so glad you're still here!" he cried. I was a little surprised by this behavior, but elders have many reasons for their strange ways so I stood waiting in his embrace, patiently. Finally he stepped back, but he kept both of his hands firmly on my shoulders. He gave me a little shake. "Sam, don't you remember me? Do you remember anything at all?"

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He looked at me intensely. His eyes were an unusual color of blue and I found them unsettling. He did seem a little familiar to me, but I couldn't quite place where I had seen him before. Perhaps at a conference or maybe a ceremony? Then I thought suddenly that I knew what he was after. Of course, we must have met in the Spirit Plane. If that was true, then I was finally advancing. The elder shook me again. "Think, man, think! What did you dream last night? It would seem like a dream to you."

And then it came back to me. It was as though I'd had amnesia and had suddenly remembered a long forgotten life, a complete life with sensations and desires and memories of years gone by, to be laid alongside the one I already had. At one time I was both a minor counsel from Britannia and an agent in the rare manuscript business. Memories of negotiations with Hopi and Navajo elders for healing patterns were intermixed with auctions and client contracts. Long, peaceful afternoons practicing the Way of Beauty were jarred by the sounds of traffic and the drop of elevators in columns of steel. I sat down heavily. "How did this happen, Elder McCaffrey?" In my confusion, I still addressed him as an elder deserving of respect and trust.

McCaffrey crossed back to the other side of my desk and perched himself on the edge of the chair. I noticed his hands shook a little as he took out his pipe and began to pack the bowl with tobacco. "How much do you remember?"

"I don't know," I said. "Everything's a jumble. How would I know what I have forgotten? It seems to me I loved books and you and Fechner and Ariel loved books and we lived in a place very far away from the spirit world. A place," I said, slowly retrieving a phrase from the depths of another life, "'where no birds sang.' I don't think.... I don't think the place was at all like what I know, what I think I know."

McCaffrey nodded. "What you're experiencing, I think, is what Ariel's grandfather called the Overlay Effect. He speculated that if a time traveler caused history to change, a person who had lived in the former history would forget his old life and only remember his new one, unless his memory was jogged after the history shift. Then it would be as if two conflicting transparencies representing radically different personalities and world views were laid across the contours of the subject's underlying psyche. The poor devil would have to try to assimilate them both."

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McCaffrey lit his pipe and as the blue clouds of smoke drifted up, I remembered my uncle and his farm and the slow quiet evenings we spent on his porch, and I remembered the hushed, anticipatory quiet at the beginning of an elders' spirit summoning ceremony. Just then, Johnson came in with a tray of herbaria. He threw one shocked look at McCaffrey smoking his pipe and fairly dropped the tray onto the desk. "Well, if that will be all, sirs," he whispered and then quickly backed his way out of the room.

"What'd I do?" McCaffrey asked.

"Your pipe is for summoning spirits, real spirits."

"Oh," he said awkwardly and proceeded to knock the tobacco with its glowing embers out onto the tray.

The casualness of this gesture was even worse. I looked around apprehensively. "You don't have both memories, do you? I mean, you don't have memories of our time, my time, the time that we're in," I corrected miserably. "You're not experiencing the Overlay Effect?"

"No." McCaffrey contemplated the embers from his pipe. "I only have memories of the time before. I think it's because I was so close to the portal when it happened." He looked at me appraisingly. "You *are* quick, but then, we always knew that." He lifted a cup of herbarium and sipped. "Oh good, mint tea." Then he settled back in the chair, holding his hands around the cup for warmth. "I'm afraid we weren't entirely honest with you, Sam. You see, we weren't just a group of friends discussing books. We did enjoy talking about books and we valued you as a contributor in our discussions, but our group was formed for an entirely different purpose.

"Ariel's grandfather, Peter Fechner, was a physicist, as, you will remember, am I." He raised his eyebrows inquiringly at me.

I nodded.

"Peter disappeared about ten years ago. No one ever found him or his body. When he was finally declared dead, it turned out he had left everything to Ariel. Ariel inherited his house, a rather large amount of cumbrous Victorian furniture, and a basement crammed full of apparatus and machinery. None of the equipment in the basement looked even remotely familiar to Ariel, but she did find a series of notebooks written in her grandfather's hand, describing the function of each apparatus. The one that interested her most was purportedly a time portal. So she called

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her great-uncle, Mortimer Fechner, and asked him if he knew anything about it. He didn't, but he told her he'd ask me about it.

"I, of course, told Mortimer that time travel was impossible, that the energy required to produce such an effect would be forever beyond our reach. I was curious, however, about the apparatus and Fechner's underlying thesis. Peter Fechner had had a solid reputation in the physics community. So I asked Mortimer to have Ariel bring the device.

"It took Ariel three days to drive across country with it. She had loaded it in the back of her grandfather's old truck, without any crating or protective material. At the time I was apprehensive she might have damaged it. Now I think it would have been better if she had.

"I pored over Peter Fechner's notebooks for days and, although I was able to determine that Fechner had posited time travel through quantum entanglement, I was never able to understand his theorems or his proofs. It was as though he had written in a foreign language and I was only able to recognize a word or two out of pages and pages of script.

"Eventually I decided we should just test the portal, for Fechner had left pretty straightforward instructions for the mechanics of its use. Actually, all we had to do was to set the thing up and type in a time and place. Fechner had claimed the portal could transport a subject to anywhere and anywhen in the past using the space-time continuum. His only caveat was that whoever or whatever was sent back would be taking a one-way trip, because the portal could not exist in a time before it was invented.

"After much discussion, Ariel, Mortimer, and I decided to send a small jade statue of Buddha back to ninth-century Honshu, Japan. We figured if someone actually saw the appearance of the statue, the phenomenon would be something the observer might not find too conflicting with his or her world beliefs. None of us thought the portal would work, really, but we made the experiment a festive occasion. Mortimer bought a bottle of champagne and we toasted each other and Ariel's grandfather. I remember it almost seemed like a wake for poor Fechner, for Ariel and Mortimer sat around telling stories about her irascible progenitor for quite some time. Finally, when we were all a little tipsy from the glow of the stories and the wine, Ariel solemnly placed the jade in the portal. I typed in two P.M. March 5, 895, and specified Honshu, Japan. 'What specific

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coordinates?' The words flashed up on the console. I hesitated. I had not come prepared to provide a particular location, though I realized instantly that such specificity would be required. 'Would you care for one of these coordinates?' the computer asked. Well, yes I would. I picked one of the coordinates at random, set the time delay for thirty seconds, and stepped out of the portal.

"There was no sound, no flash of light. One moment the statue was there and then it simply wasn't anymore. At that point I was pretty certain about what had happened to Peter Fechner and I was just as certain I wasn't going to follow him. Mortimer and Ariel, however, thought they might like to try it. They just weren't ready yet. It takes courage to leave your home and friends and the world you've known, when you know you'll never be coming back."

He sighed and then continued as though the task of telling had become a burdensome weight, dragging him down.

"We tried a couple more experiments, just to be sure. We sent one of those paperweights with the snow falling in it back a year in time to the bookstore. After a thorough search we found it covered with cobwebs in the corner of the broom closet. We sent a Liberty silver dollar three months back to Ariel's apartment and she discovered it in her desk drawer. One thing we were worried about and spent a long time discussing was whether a person going back in time might materialize in a wall or underground. But Fechner's notes said he had written in fail-safes to prevent this from happening, and we ultimately decided to trust he had managed this."

McCaffrey absentmindedly took out his pipe and started packing it with tobacco again. He caught my apprehensive glance and put the pipe back in his shirt pocket. "Sorry," he said, "old habits die hard. This morning Ariel and Mortimer decided to take the plunge, and it seems I inadvertently took a different sort of plunge with them. Before Ariel and Mortimer left, I had given a lot of thought to what it would be like to live in the past, friendless in a culture I was unfamiliar with, but it had never occurred to me that I might be placed in a similar situation if their actions in the past changed my present time. The world we live in today is nothing like the world we lived in yesterday, and I don't like it. I don't like it one bit." He paused and took a ragged breath. "So that's why I need your help,

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Sam. I need you to help me change back history. I need you to help me put things right."

McCaffrey looked at me expectantly but I found myself incapable of speech. The part of me that was the counsel thought this was a wonderful teaching story and would be happy to help the elder in any way possible. The part of me that was from before, however, was furious because history had been changed and because these arrogant idiots had changed it. Most of all this part of me was furious because I had thought these people were my friends and they had excluded me from the major focus of their lives. These two parts or selves tangled me in such a knot of conflicting ideas and emotions, I found it hard to cut through with articulate speech. "Why?" I finally croaked.

"Why didn't we tell you?" asked McCaffrey. I nodded. That question was as good as any. "Because I didn't trust you. Mortimer wanted to tell you. He looked on you as a kind of protégé, said your heart was in the right place. And Ariel certainly would have told you. Ariel trusts just about everybody. She hasn't had the hard knocks Mortimer and I have, and she was particularly fond of you. But I felt sometime or another you might let slip to one of your colleagues that you had a way to go back in time, or that you might be tempted to plant objects in particular places in the past so you could find and market them in our time. Mind you, I didn't think it was likely you'd do either, but I felt it was possible and I just didn't want to take the chance."

This is what it must feel like to have schizophrenia, I thought, to have two people warring for dominion in your head. Part of me wanted to pummel the balding man sitting across from me. Part of me prattled on excitedly about initiation and tribal teaching traditions. "What is it that you want of me?" I finally managed.

"I want you to come with me, see how the portal works and act as my backup in case I'm not successful in changing things back. If you're in close proximity to the portal when I travel back, you'll remember how things were, if things change. You'll be able to see if I was successful."

"When they went back in time, where did Ariel and Mortimer go?"

"Ariel followed her plan of taking *Winnie Ille Pooh* to the boy, Caesar. I don't think that would have changed things. Mortimer, however, liked your idea about Columbus. He wasn't going to take a book back with him,

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though. He knew better than to try to change history. He just wanted to go and see the ships off, maybe even sign on as a ship hand with one of them. He must have done something to change things though, because from what I can tell from the few hours I've been here in this time, the European conquest of the Americas never happened. The Native Americans rule this part of the continent, don't they?"

"The land is under the protection of the Hopi Navajo Circle," I said.

"My point," said McCaffrey. "So you will help me? You'll help me put history right?"

"Right now, I'm in too much of a muddle to make any decisions, but I would like to see Ariel's Portal. Is it at the bookstore? Does the bookstore still...."

"Yes, it still exists. It was too close to the portal apparently to be changed when the rest of history changed." As McCaffrey said this I felt a longing to see the bookstore with its dusty shelves and haphazard stacks of books. At this time of day the light would be slanting in the front windows to warm the travel shelves with their volumes about boats and camels and adventurers who would not turn back.

We took a skimmer. I preferred this small but elegant little craft to the more imposing vehicles that sailed so far above the ground you couldn't see details. As we maneuvered over the plains, my memories from that other time superimposed pavement and high-rises over the tall waving grasses where the antelope were now contentedly grazing.

"It's funny," McCaffrey said, "I could have sworn we were dead in the middle of winter yesterday.

"Yes, I remember that." I also remembered the drifting snow and the miserable cold. I remembered the smell of exhaust and the people scurrying, trying to get ahead or, at least, not to be left behind. I remembered the homeless and the elders locked away in nursing homes. I remembered Willy Loman.

McCaffrey looked up through the skylight of the skimmer. "You build 'castles in the air' now?"

"Yes, our lodges are layered in the air. That way we don't disturb the fields."

McCaffrey craned his neck for a better look. "But how do you keep

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them floating up there? For that matter, how does this thing we're riding in work? Does it use some sort of magnetic or anti-gravity field?"

"I don't know," I said. "I am not an elder." As I said this, my disparate selves seemed to gel into one cohesive whole and I knew this man was not an elder. He was totally from that other time. That was when I made up my mind. But I wanted to discuss it with him. "Maybe," I said, "you should take a while before going back. Get to know this time. Things are very different...."

"No." McCaffrey interrupted me impatiently. Then he smiled and said ruefully, "I'm sorry. It's just that I've got this urgent feeling I've got to put things back the way they were *right now*. Things are too changed. You don't know. I had a helluva time finding you. I didn't think I ever would. I didn't think I'd ever see anyone I knew again." He brought himself up short. "It just isn't right to change history. We did something we shouldn't have and now we need to correct it."

I felt for him then, but I wasn't going to change my decision. The ethics of the situation were too big for me to get a handle on and I treasured the time I was in now, so I kept to the course that felt right to me. I brought the skimmer to a gentle stop near where the bookstore had been. I saw it then, in the short distance, nearly hidden by the tall grasses and the rise of the land in front of it. It looked very different out of context, out of the city that I remembered it in, but still the sight of it brought a lump to my throat. It was a heart place, a home long forgotten. I wondered why no one in my time had ever discovered it, out in this field, but then I thought someone probably had, and had chosen not to disturb it.

We went down the old, familiar steps. The tinkle of the bell as McCaffrey opened the door brought waves of memory back to me. Once inside, McCaffrey excused himself for a few minutes, and I stood looking at all my old friends, all the old books I had loved that had given me sustenance. I felt a pang of sorrow. There were so many authors, so many stories that no one but our little book group would ever know.

McCaffrey returned wearing the type of clothes that were worn in Columbus's time. I couldn't help but smile to see the man in tights. "Now I know why you want to go back there. You miss the fashion statement."

McCaffrey didn't even crack a smile and I could see how scared he was. In his mind, he was doing something heroic to try to make things

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right again. "Are you sure you don't want to stay?" I asked. "It's not so bad in this time, in this place."

"No, I need to make it right and, in case I fail, I need your assurance that you will also try to make it right."

"Don't worry," I said, "everything will be all right." He paused a beat over the semantics, I think, but then he let it go. We went down into the basement and there, in the center of the room, was the portal. It looked like a gaudy dressing room for some 1960s star, but it had depth and it was made of a material I didn't recognize. McCaffrey showed me how to use the console to set the time and the place. Then I stepped out of the machine. McCaffrey looked at me wistfully and gave a little wave. "Well, good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye, McCaffrey." And then McCaffrey wasn't there anymore. I waited a little, looking out the window to see if there were any changes, but there weren't. I hadn't really expected any. There were no buildings in sight. The tall grasses still bent to the wind. The antelopes still grazed in the distance. I shut the windows to the basement and locked the door. On my way out of the shop, I selected a copy of Yeats's poems (for all my books had disappeared with the time change) and Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*.

Then I took the skimmer to a lake I loved, just beyond Eeyore's Meadow. All the long afternoon, I sat by Piglet's Lake. I watched the blue heron fishing and read a little from the Pooh book (it was wonderful to have these teaching stories and not to have to wait for a gathering to hear them). Most of all though, I just sat and thought, remembering my friends, remembering Mortimer Fechner's passion for literature and Ariel's enthusiasm for Pooh, remembering McCaffrey and his pipe. Sometimes I imagined Ariel giving the Pooh Cycle to the boy, Caesar. In my mind, she was in a hall full of light, and cedar incense burned on a brazier nearby. Sometimes I imagined McCaffrey and Fechner standing on the foredeck of a ship, looking straight ahead, smoking their pipes and telling each other stories. I liked to think that McCaffrey had found Fechner. I knew that if he had found Fechner, he would be all right.

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Ron Goulart has contributed a ghost story or three over the years, but when was the last time he gave us a ghost writer story? Here he brings us the tale of Paul Sanson, a scribe with a rather unenviable job.

Memoirs of the Witch Queen

By Ron Goulart

HE DIDN'T SNEEZE.

That surprised him because he always sneezed a few times on awakening. It was allergy season in this part of Connecticut.

As Paul Sanson was swinging out of bed in his small rented cottage, the phone rang. He knew who that was. They called him just about every other morning at a few minutes beyond eight.

Yawning once, he went into the small living room and picked up the phone off the rickety coffee table. "Yeah?"

"Paul Sanson, please," said a polite and unfamiliar female voice.

"Speaking."

"My name is Amy and I'm calling about your International Bank Credit Card account."

"What happened to Tom?"

The young woman sighed. "Well, I suppose I really shouldn't tell you this, Paul," she said hesitantly. "Yet, since you've been dealing with Tom for several weeks — "

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"I've been harassed by Tom and his false claims that I owe — "

"I'll get to that, Paul," said Amy. "First, though, let me explain about Tom." She sighed sadly once again. "He drove his motorcycle off a bridge late yesterday afternoon and both he and the motorcycle sank in the river without a trace."

Holding back a pleased chuckle, Sanson inquired, "Which river was that?"

"Oh, I'm afraid we can't give out specific information pertaining to our actual location. Suffice it to say that it was a very deep river."

"During the entire time that Tom hounded me about the money that I don't actually owe you people," said Sanson, scratching his left ankle with his right foot, "he never once mentioned that he was a motorcycle buff."

"He wasn't. That's what's so odd, you know," she said. "He only bought the motorcycle early yesterday afternoon. He'd never owned one before."

"Sad," observed Sanson, not meaning it. "So you've taken over his task of calling me at odd hours to demand that I pay sums which I — "

"No, Paul, that isn't the reason I called." Her voice brightened. "It turns out you were right about having made those arrears payments."

"I was? I mean, I was, yes."

"In fact, you have no back balance at all and you can start using your card again immediately. Your new credit line is fifty thousand dollars."

"Beg pardon?"

"Fifty thousand dollars," Amy repeated. "And since you're on our Especially Valued Customers list, Paul, you don't have to make any payments for eighteen months."

Making a puzzled noise, he said, "Well, that's...nice," and ended the call.

He walked barefoot over to the living room window, gazed out into the patch of woodlands that surrounded his cottage. A light rain was falling. "How did I get from deadbeat to Especially Valued?"

He was eating bran flakes and scanning the front page of the *New Beckford News-Pilot* when the phone rang again.

Sanson returned to the living room. "Hello?"

"Hey, dude. Did I wake you up?"

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"No such luck, Rudy. What's wrong now?"

"Deadline," said his youthful editor in far-off Manhattan. "Does that word have any meaning for you?"

"Greensea Publishing hired me to *polish* Inza Warburton's memoirs, not write them," he reminded Rudy Korkin. "I've faxed you folks my revisions of every page she's given me thus far."

"When we hired you for such an outrageous fee, we assumed you'd be able to speed her up and — "

"Fifteen thousand dollars is not an outrageous fee. It's actually on the modest side. The fellows who used to mow my lawn earn more than that in — "

"You know we have to have a completed manuscript in three months, dude. Certain people here at Greensea are getting — ".

"Inza Warburton is aware of that, Rudy."

"I had to fight to get them to take her book for the winter list," said his editor. "And it was a battle to get you hired. Since I've worked with you before and you live just one town over from that self-styled witch, you were — "

"She's a witch queen," corrected Sanson. "Meaning she's top-seeded in the quack sorcery community. You knew that, Rudy, which is why Greensea wanted her memoirs in the first place."

"Be that as it may," said Rudy, "we've got to start seeing more pages damned soon. Otherwise...otherwise...otherwise...."

"Rudy?"

Sanson heard a bouncing thump, followed by the sound of stacks of fat manuscripts sliding off a desk to thunk onto a thick rug.

"Rudy?"

Then a young woman said, "Paul, this is Polly."

"What's happened to Rudy?"

"Well, I don't exactly know. He's lying here on the floor of his office in some sort of coma and his feet are twitching and his face is a lobster color. I have to go get help. We'll call you later."

"Yeah, okay."

For several minutes he sat in his only armchair, looking out not at the damp, overcast day but at the blank tan wall behind his small sofa.

Rising slowly, he said, "I'd better go see Inza Warburton."

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* * *

The carved wooden door was yanked open with such force that the brass gargoyle knocker rattled and thumped. A large, plump arm reached out from the shadowy hallway, pulling him in out of the rainy early afternoon.

"So good to see you, hon."

Two large plump arms encircled him and, as the heavy oaken door was booted shut, he was hugged enthusiastically by the immense Inza Warburton.

She pressed him closer, engulfed him in her vast bosom, lifted him several inches up off the venerable hardwood floor.

"Oof," Sanson managed to say.

Releasing him, Inza asked, "Well, are you impressed?"

"By what? Your smothering abilities?"

In her middle thirties, she weighed about 320 pounds. She wore her black hair cut short and slicked down. As usual, she was clad in one of her dust-colored muumuus and an Egyptian Eye of Osiris medal swung from her ample neck on a silver chain.

"Tell me about your morning," the witch queen invited, taking him by the arm and leading him into the cluttered and dim-lit living room.

The beam-ceilinged room, where he usually worked with Inza, was crowded with glass-doored bookcases, dusty display cabinets, several claw-foot tables, an assortment of stuffed animals — some of which Sanson had never been able to identify — sprawls of bright colored cloth, a yellowed human skull, a large crystal ball that glowed greenly in a dark corner, and a scatter of incense sticks sending up colored smoke of various scents.

As the immense woman arranged herself in a faded purple Morris chair, he asked, "You had something to do with what's been happening?"

She grinned. "I've had the feeling of late, dear heart, that you don't actually believe in me and my powers."

Sanson sat on the edge of a straight-backed chair. "I told you when we started working on your memoirs three months ago, Inza, that I didn't believe in witchcraft. But I'm a pretty good writer and I can put stuff into satisfactory form for — "

"Every word we've written together, Paul dear, is the truth. I especially want you to accept me for what I am, since, as you ought to know by now, I've grown quite fond of you."

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He moved his chair a few inches farther away from the witch queen. "It isn't really a good idea for me to get too involved with the people I work with on books."

"But I can really help you, Paul," she told him. "Look what I did this morning, for example. Cleared up your allergies, canceled your major debt, fixed it so your editor won't bother you anymore."

"You used witchcraft to — "

"Witchcraft, sorcery, black magic, a bit of Satanic help," she amplified. "Haven't you been paying attention to what we're writing? I really do possess considerable occult powers, dear."

He took a deep breath. "You're capable of killing Rudy from a distance?"

"Relax, he's not dead. Merely sidelined."

"He was in a coma and — "

"Telephone." Inza gestured at him with one fat beringed hand.

"What?" His cell phone chimed. He pulled it free of his jacket pocket, opened it. "Hello?"

"Rudy is all right, Paul," said Polly, the assistant Greensea Publishing editor, in a voice not rich with optimism. "He's not unconscious anymore and that strange crimson color is gone."

"I guess that's good news. Where is he?"

"Right now, I'd estimate, he's en route to Iola, Wisconsin."

"Oh, so?"

"He's going to be recuperating at his sister's place for a few months."

"Didn't know he had a sister."

"None of us here at Greensea did. But Rudy was always sort of secretive about his personal life."

"Will you be editing our book now?"

"Actually, no. They're sending a new fellow over from Germany. That's where, you know, the munitions conglomerate that owns us is based. From Munich, but I don't know his name yet."

"Lazlo Font," provided Inza from her purple chair.

"Polly, if you talk to Rudy, give him my best."

"Sure will. What a day, huh?"

Ending the call, he frowned across at the witch queen. "Who the devil is Lazlo Font?"

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"Our new editor, hon," she answered. "Much less of a martinet than dear Rudy and — "

"Rudy was a nitwit, not a martinet."

"And despite the fact that he was schooled in a very strict military school, Lazlo is an easygoing gent. We'll have plenty of extra time to finish up the book and...telephone."

His phone chimed. "Yeah?"

"Polly again. Sorry to interrupt you while you're probably working on the book, but I forgot to tell you something."

"Which is?"

"We'll be cutting you the check today, mailing it out tomorrow, Paul."

"What check?"

"It's a special extra advance against your share of the royalties. Rudy apparently arranged that just before he was...um...stricken. Twenty-five thousand dollars. Well, goodbye again."

Rising, he moved closer to Inza. "Some more of your witchcraft?"

She spread her fat hands wide, making a very unsuccessful attempt to appear guileless. "It might be if I were a true witch, one with supernatural powers. But you've been calling me a self-styled — "

"No, nope. That was what Rudy called you," he told her. "Myself, I'm well on the way toward accepting your claims. And I really don't mind your using magic to get me more dough than I got from Greensea in the first place."

"Well, thank you, dear."

"The thing is, Inza, this other stuff — causing my creditors to drive motorcycles off bridges, inflicting Rudy Korkin with the plague or whatever it was — that's got to cease."

When she sighed, her entire big body quivered and her bracelets jingled. "Very well. No more black magic or sorcery on your behalf," she promised. "I do hope Lazlo isn't going to upset you."

"Christ, what's wrong with *him*?"

"Nothing, it's only that he's two hundred and twenty-six years old," she replied. "Don't worry, though, it really doesn't show."

"How did he get to be two hundred and twenty-six years old?" Sanson sat down again, slumping.

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"By not dying. Vampires are noted for that."

He stood up. "Great, Inza, just fine. You replace an editor who's a nitwit with one who's a certified member of the undead."

"Lazlo's going to be a lot easier to get along with."

Sanson began to pace, as best he could in the cluttered living room. "You're still going to have to come up with some more pages of your memoirs."

"Now that the pressure from dear Rudy is gone, I'm feeling inspired."

He returned to his chair, nearly tripping over a ceramic salamander. "Fine, I'll come by Friday afternoon and we can — "

"I've been thinking, hon, that we could work a lot more productively if you were on hand."

"Meaning?"

"On hand, on deck, aboard," she explained. "What I mean is, live here in the mansion. There are plenty of spare bedrooms and, as you know, I had that gourmet kitchen installed with all the handsome cabinets and racks for — "

"I'm a writer, not a chef," he informed her. "I have a house. My computer is there, my files are there. My privacy is there, Inza. No, I don't want to be moving in here."

"Very well, dear. I won't press you," she said, grunting as she raised her bulk up from the chair. "You're sure there aren't any other little problems you'd like me to solve for you?"

"No, please. No more black magic." He rose and headed for the way out.

"All right. I'll be expecting you Friday, around two." She started lumbering toward him.

"Around two, fine." He departed before she could bestow a farewell hug.

AS THE AFTERNOON waned, the weather worsened. Driving down the winding road from Inza's hilltop mansion, Sanson encountered not only heavy rain but crackles of bluish lightning and closer and closer rumbling booms of thunder.

The politely liberal FM station he usually listened to in the car

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seemed to be broadcasting nothing but static and he switched to the only jazz station in the area just in time to hear the nasal-voiced disc jockey announce that the next hour would be devoted to an uninterrupted playing of the best of the Tijuana Brass.

He turned off the radio.

The windshield wipers, which he'd been meaning to replace, were making that strange keening noise again while slapping away at the pelting rain.

A huge flash of lightning suddenly illuminated the tree-lined stretch of road and he saw the young woman.

She was standing at the side of the lane, slim in a white raincoat and green scarf and holding a small yellow polka dot umbrella over her head.

He slowed, stopped alongside her and lowered his window halfway. "Trouble?" he called out into the rain.

She came hurrying over to his car. "Nothing serious. If it wasn't for this darn storm, I could walk home."

"Car break down?" He asked, although there was no sign of an automobile.

Nodding, she pointed toward the woodlands beyond the narrow road. "Yes, it's parked up in the cemetery," she answered. "Won't start."

"The Old New Beckford Burying Ground?"

She smiled. "Sounds strange, I know," she said. "But I'm an artist and I was sitting in my car sketching some of the old eighteenth-century gravestones and crypts."

"Well, get in," he invited. "I'll drive you home."

She walked around the front of his car, folded up the umbrella and settled into the passenger seat. "I don't suppose you'd want to take a look at my car?"

"That's about all I'm capable of doing, looking," he admitted. "Repairs are beyond me."

She smiled again. "I'll call my garage when I get home," she said. "My name's Sara Bardsley."

"Paul Sanson."

"Oh, the writer?"

As he commenced driving again, he glanced over at her. "You've actually heard of me?"

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"Sure, I have eclectic tastes," Sara answered. "I read the children's book you did and — "

"I wrote that six years ago, when I was married and in a better mood," he said. "I do mostly nonfiction now."

"That's a shame."

"True, but what I write now helps me handle alimony and household expenses better. Where do you live?"

"I didn't think I'd want to live on a street with a spooky name," the young woman said. "But when I saw this cottage on Gallows Hill Road, I really loved it. So I bought it."

"Bought it?"

"With my inheritance," she explained. "I was working in commercial art for a few years and then when my Aunt Theresa left me some money, I decided to do what I wanted to do. That was painting. Trite maybe, but gratifying. At least for the five months I've been at it."

"I could use an inheritance about now." He spotted Gallows Hill Road on the right and guided the car onto it.

"My number is 303. For some reason 303 comes *after* 305. Just around the next bend," said Sara. "What are you working on now, Paul?"

"Nothing much, a sort of ghostwriting job." He located a silvery mailbox with the numbers 303 neatly painted on its side and turned on to a rain-drenched driveway.

The cottage was small, built to resemble something from an England of two or three centuries earlier. Tudor-style with a simulated thatch roof, small stained glass windows, and considerable ivy.

"Good thing," remarked Sara as he parked near the red front door, "you aren't here on a sunny day. You'd probably find the place too cozy."

"Looks pretty cozy even in a thunderstorm."

"Since you've been so helpful, can I offer you a cup of coffee?"

"Sure, fine."

The young woman ran to the door, unlocked it.

The parlor was uncluttered and had beamed ceilings and sturdy old furniture.

"Hold on a minute," she said as she left the room. "I'll call the garage and make some coffee."

Wandering around the warm, cozy room, Sanson noticed several

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framed watercolors on the off-white walls. All depicted ruined tombstones, decaying crypts, or bleak autumnal landscapes.

From the kitchen she called, "Decaf?"

"Sure."

When she returned a few moments later with the two coffee cups and a small plate of scones on a tray, he realized that without her coat and scarf, Sara was a very pretty young woman. Slim, about twenty-five and with auburn-colored hair. She was extremely pale.

"You feeling okay?" he asked as he took a cup of coffee from the tray she'd placed on an end table.

"Certainly. Why?" She sat on the arm of the sofa.

He touched at his own cheek. "You seem pale."

"You'll have to get used to that." She stirred two spoons of real sugar into her cup. "I'm just naturally pale. And sometimes wan."

He said, "In order to get used to that, I'd have to see you again."

"Obviously," she said.

FRIDAY WAS YET another day that started off wet and gray. But despite the gloomy weather and the fact that he'd be spending the afternoon with the witch queen, Sanson was in a splendid mood as he shaved.

"I'm feeling chipper," he decided while studying himself in the mildly warped medicine cabinet mirror. "Although most people don't use that word anymore."

The cause for his good mood was the fact that he had a dinner date tonight with Sara Bardsley. When he'd suggested they eat at his favorite steakhouse, The Meat Department, over in South Norwalk, she explained that she was a vegetarian. So they were going to dine at a new place called Viva Las Veggies in Westport.

"I can eat nothing but vegetables once a week," he said as he finished shaving and slapped on an aftershave that smelled like a pine forest on a windy day. "Twice or three times probably if it's with her."

The wall phone in his modest kitchen sounded. He hurried to answer. Now that Inza Warburton had used sorcery to improve his financial status, he knew that early morning calls probably wouldn't be from creditors.

"Hello."

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"Perhaps you can help me, sir," said a breathy female voice. "I'm just awfully eager to locate that loathsome scoundrel named Paul Sanson. He is once more terribly, terribly late with his alimony payment."

Sanson sighed. "Three days isn't even terribly late, Mindy, let alone terribly, terribly," he told his former spouse. "A tiny bit overdue is the correct legal term. How are things out there in Santa Monica?"

"Lousy," answered Mindy Boon. "It's been raining torrentially for days on end."

"Build an ark."

"If you're through your smartass phase, Paul," she said, "let's talk about the money you owe me. What, precisely, does three days late mean?"

"It means I mailed your blasted check to you three days after the deadline. The outrageous sum is winging its way to you even as we speak. I swear, as God is my witness."

"Which god would that be, an Egyptian jackal god?" inquired Mindy. "Or maybe a snake god from a primitive cannibal tribe?"

"It'll be there today or tomorrow."

"We'll see," she said. "So, tell me, what do you think of my show?"

"Which feeble sitcom are you alluding to?" he asked the actress.

"Geez, you're even worse now than you were during our dumb marriage," she complained. "I happen to be starring in *Lethal Injection: Texas,* the highly successful spinoff of *Lethal Injection.* Last week we were third in the ratings, just below *I Married a Fat Girl* and just above *So You Want To Have Elective Surgery."*

"Congratulations," he said. "But, Mindy, while our divorce settlement obliges me to send you immense amounts of alimony, it doesn't say anything about my having to suffer through whatever piece of tripe you and that halfwit TV writer you're shacked up with are currently foisting on — "

"I am *not* living with anybody," she insisted. "And I wish that you'd...."

"That I'd what?"

"Hush. The house is starting to make some very funny noises."

"Okay, I'll sign off and let you listen."

"Oh, my God!" cried Mindy. "It's a mudslide! The whole entire house

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is starting to slide downhill toward the frigging Pacific Ocean. I'll have to call you back."

Paul took a deep breath and called Inza.

"Yes, Paul dear?" she answered.

"I thought we agreed on no more witchcraft and black magic," he told her. "Don't work any more tricks on anyone associated with me. Assassinating my dippy former wife by causing — "

"What happened to her house is entirely due to natural causes. You build on the side of a hill in LA and then it rains a lot and — woosh! — Down you go."

"So what am I now? An accessory to murder?"

"The lady ain't dead," the witch assured him. "She has, as a result of her bumpy descent to the sea, suffered a concussion. When she comes to, she will have no memory of the fact that you owe her money. In fact, her memory will tell her that you paid her one large settlement and don't owe her diddly."

"Her lawyer will remember the alimony."

"Now, talk about coincidences. Her shyster is going to trip — on the Walk of the Stars, as a matter of fact, right on top of Marilyn Monroe's star — and suffer a substantial conk on the noggin. He, too, will have a slight shifting of memories," Inza told him. "Ouch. I'm monitoring this on one of my crystal balls and he just took his nosedive. Painful to watch."

"All right, Inza," he said. "I'll accept your interference this time, but don't do me any more favors. Okay?"

"As you wish," promised the witch queen. "What say you come over early and have lunch before we get to work on the memoirs? I'll be fixing shark tartare and — "

"Thanks, but I have a lunch date," he lied.

"Actually, you don't have a lunch date, Paul. But far be it from me to force myself on anyone. I'm content to bide my time."

"Fine."

"Yellow roses."

"What?"

"That little cutie pie you plan to see tonight," she said. "Yellow roses are her favorite. Since you intend to buy her a bouquet, make it yellow roses."

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"Inza, my private life is separate from my business life," he said, annoyed. "Don't go poking into any more — "

"Hey, hon, I wouldn't dream of interfering," said the witch. "Not yet, anyway."

"I'll be over at two." He ended the call.

Unexpectedly, there were several cars parked in the driveway of Inza Warburton's slightly ramshackle mansion. Sanson parked his car behind a gray Mercedes. Nearer the house he passed a lemon yellow VW bug and a dusty Saab. Leaning against a yellowing hedge was a ten-speed bicycle.

The massive oaken front door hung half open. As he stepped into the hallway, a plump young woman holding a can of diet soda smiled at him. "Are you joining the coven?"

"Not immediately, no." He made his way farther into the house.

In the cluttered living room a bearded man was looking critically at the plate of sandwiches perched on a claw-footed table. "Pretty spartan fare for a cocktail party," he remarked to the gaunt woman beside him.

Inza emerged from the shadow at the foot of the staircase leading up to the second floor of the mansion. "I have a big surprise for you, hon." Before he could dodge, the immense woman grabbed him, hugged him enthusiastically, and kissed him warmly on the cheek.

Pulling free, he inquired, "Aren't we going to be working on your book?"

She took hold of his arm. "I'm throwing an impromptu party for Lazlo," she explained as she urged him upwards. "I invited the members of my coven over to meet the old boy. But I'd like to introduce you to him first."

"Isn't he still in Europe?" he asked, following her up into the shadows above.

"Would I be throwing a party for him if he were?" She was guiding him along the upstairs corridor. "Now, that door on your left is to the spare bedroom you'll be occupying once you move in. Care to take a quick look around before — "

"I'm *not* moving in," he reminded her. "Let's just meet this Font guy."

"As you will. This is his room over on the right." She reached out to open a dark wooden door. "Lazlo, are you decent?"

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On the aged Persian carpet, resting directly in front of the canopy bed, was a very handsome ebony coffin rich with silver trim.

Sanson halted just across the threshold. "How'd you get that here? Doesn't customs have to — "

"Teleportation, dear." Inza made a sweeping motion with her left hand while producing a whooshing sound. "Lazlo's even better at that than I am."

"He teleported his coffin all the way from Europe?"

"The coffin with me in it, my boy." The lid of the coffin swung open with a faint creak, and a broad-shouldered man sat up in it. "Myself plus a generous smattering of my native Hungarian soil. Pleased to be working with you at Greensea, Paul. I really think you and Inza here have got a terrific book in the works. It's going to be on the *New York Times* list if I'm any judge." Hopping free of the coffin, the wide, tall man held out his hand.

"I thought," said Sanson, shaking hands, very gingerly, with his new editor, "that vampires slept by day."

Both Font and Inza laughed and the witch queen said, "An old wives' tale, hon."

"I do nap in my coffin," admitted the vampire editor. "I spent quite a few years in Spain in the 1890s and picked up the siesta habit."

"Lazlo, I have a dozen people downstairs who are very eager to meet you."

"We'll talk about this potential blockbuster of yours after I meet everybody in the coven, Paul." Brushing some Hungarian dust from his dark trousers, he went striding toward the doorway.

"Now, isn't he a much nicer editor than that ninny Rudy Korkin?" asked the witch queen, nudging Sanson affectionately.

"Oh, yes, definitely," he replied. "And he sure doesn't look his age."

In spite of the uneasiness he felt about having an undead editor, Sanson grew increasingly happy in the week following the witch queen's welcoming party. His upbeat mood was due entirely to Sara Bardsley.

As Inza had predicted, the young artist's favorite flowers were yellow roses. The dinner at Viva Las Veggies went very well and he found that he actually enjoyed his meatless meal. That night, she kissed him when he

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brought her back to her faux rustic cottage. And that Saturday, after they'd gone to the New Beckford multiplex to see the Puppetoon version of Philip K. Dick's *Eye in the Sky*, he spent the night with her.

Sara was the first woman he'd felt any real enthusiasm about since his divorce. She was attractive, bright, and affectionate and she'd actually read several of his books and could discuss them intelligently. She even urged him to start a new children's book so that she could illustrate it. Sunday, he did something he hadn't done in over two years: took her dancing at the SoNo Retro Disco Club in South Norwalk.

Even though he was working with a witch and being edited by a vampire, Sanson felt that the quality of his life was pretty good.

IT WAS WHILE browsing among the soy burger selections at the Eden, Inc. Organic Market in Norwalk early in the afternoon of the following Monday that he encountered the International Occult Police Organization agent.

Sanson had promised Sara that he'd modify his eating habits, which was why he'd driven over here. Wanting to make a modest start, he hadn't taken a shopping cart but only one of the small handbaskets.

He was leaning forward studying the packages through the glass windows, when a modest-sized, mostly bald man of about forty-five stumbled over the wheel of an abandoned shopping cart and bumped into him.

"Terribly sorry," the man apologized, disentangling himself.

"That's okay. Probably my fault," said Sanson. "I was comparing and contrasting the vegan soy burger with the veggie salsa burger and didn't notice your approach."

Smoothing the front of his tweedy sport coat, the small bald man said, "Actually, Sanson, it was entirely my fault and merely a subterfuge."

"Oh, so?"

Gesturing at the nearby dining area of the large organic supermarket, he suggested, "Might I buy you a cup of herb tea? I'm most anxious to have a chat with you."

"About what exactly? And oh, yeah, who are you?"

"My name is Victor Truex. I'm a roving operative for the International

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Occult Police Organization." He took hold of Sanson's arm and led him along a supplement aisle to one of the small empty tables.

"I've never heard of your organization."

"Yes, we strive for a very low profile. Extremely low," explained Truex. "Wouldn't have approached you now except for the fact that you're involved with Count Lazlo Font."

"He's a count?"

"Oh, yes, has been for close to two centuries. Ever since he impaled the three relatives who were ahead of him on the succession list." He sat in one of the blond wooden chairs, nodded at the empty one across the table. "Peppermint tea's my favorite, but you might prefer — "

"Peppermint's as good as any. Why're you guys interested in Font?"

"Tell you soon as I fetch our tea." Truex rose and hurried to the counter.

Sanson sat his basket on the tiled floor next to his chair. All it contained so far was a jar of organic peanut butter and two cans of green tea soda.

When Truex returned with the cups of peppermint tea, he explained, "The specialty of my particular department of IOPO...that stands for International Occult — "

"I figured as much. So why?"

"My department is involved with wiping out vampires worldwide," the bald agent told him. "We lost track of Font for several months until he turned up here as an editor for Greensea Publications."

"It was written up in *Publishers Weekly*."

"That's how we found out."

"How do I fit in?"

From the breast pocket of his jacket, Truex extracted a postcard-size photo. It looked old and had a brownish tinge. "Let's confirm that you're involved with the man we're hunting for. Is this Count Font?"

Sanson took the photo and studied it for a few seconds. "Sure, although he looks younger here."

"That was taken in Budapest in 1907 when he was about a hundred years younger than he is now."

Handing back the picture of his editor, Sanson inquired, "If you know where he is, why do you need my help?"

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"What I must find out is where exactly he keeps his coffin," answered the IOPO operative. "When I destroy that and the sample of his native soil, I'll have destroyed Count Font as well."

"That shouldn't be too difficult."

"It's proven extremely difficult ever since IOPO was formed nearly a half-century ago," said Truex. "But if we have a inside man, things will go better." Removing the stringless teabag from his cup with his spoon, he dropped it on a napkin. "You're intimate with Inza Warburton and — "

"Wait now. Intimate isn't exactly the term I'd use," he explained. "I'm helping Inza write her memoirs. Font is now my editor. Basically a business relationship."

"As I understand it, Inza has been using her paranormal powers to help you considerably." Truex sipped his peppermint tea. "Myself, I wouldn't accept favors from the likes of her."

"She's straightened out my finances some, admittedly using witchcraft," he admitted. "Nobody was actually hurt and — "

"They never found the body of the credit agency man who rode his brand new motorcycle into a river," Truex pointed out. "Your former spouse is in a Santa Monica hospital with a broken leg and three fractured ribs."

Leaning forward, Sanson said, "Inza told me that eventually they'd pulled Tom out of the water and he survived the plunge. Marny wasn't hurt at all, outside of a few bruises from riding the house downhill."

"Rather naïve to expect a witch, a witch queen actually, to be trustworthy." The operative took another sip of his tea. "I don't imagine she mentioned Mr. Henkel at all."

"Who's Henkel?"

"He was bicycling along the Pacific Coast Highway when your ex-wife's house made its run to the sea and sideswiped him. He's still in a coma in that same Santa Monica hospital."

"Even so." Sanson circled his cup with his right hand. "I don't think I want to get involved with your outfit."

Truex lowered his voice. "Are you afraid that Inza is aware of this conversation we're having? Is that why you're — "

"Well, she does have that crystal ball and she is able to eavesdrop on just about — "

"Put your left hand in your coat pocket."

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Frowning, he did that. He extracted a round silver medallion about three inches in diameter. "What's this thing?"

"A St. Norbert's medal," answered Truex. "Very effective in preventing sorcerers and witches from keeping track of you *and* from harming you. This one, and the one I'm using, was blessed by the Pope and six cardinals. Plus which, it contains a powerful anti-black magic chip developed by our lab in Zurich."

He dropped the medallion back into his pocket. "I guess I don't feel especially guilty about what Inza's done for me," he said finally. "My financial state is much better than it was. And within a few weeks I'll be finished with this assignment."

"So you believe."

"With the money I'll get when the book's turned in plus what I already have, I can take it easy," he explained to the IOPO agent. "No more scuffling, no more dodging creditors or worrying about how I'm going to come up with another alimony payment." Sanson leaned back in his chair. "As you may know, I've met a terrific woman and once I'm clear of Inza, I'll be settling down with her. Probably somewhere far from Connecticut."

Making a sympathetic sound, Truex said, "You must be aware of how fond Inza is of you. She wants you to move into her mansion and eventually become a member of her coven. You're never going to get clear."

"Sure, I am. Sara and I — "

"Here's another photo." He extracted a brown-tinted picture from his breast pocket. "This one was taken in Vienna in 1917." He passed the photograph across the table.

Sanson picked it up, then dropped it. "It looks like Sara, but...."

"Her real name is Emily Westerland. She was born in Somerset, England, in 1897 and was recruited by Count Font when she was seventeen and working in a music hall in London."

Sanson turned the picture face down and pushed it, slowly, back toward the agent. "I don't understand."

"They've used her to keep you pacified," Truex told him. "Inza hasn't been able to woo you into her circle. They're convinced, however, that eventually Sara will be able to accomplish that."

"You want me to help you get Font," he said, standing. "For all I know that picture's a fake you're using to con me into working for you guys."

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"Ask Sara," Truex suggested, handing him a gray business card. "Then contact me and we'll get to work on a plan to defeat this whole bunch."

Sanson turned away, abandoning his hand basket, and hurried out of there.

SARA, WEARING JEANS and a pullover, opened the door while he was still hurrying across the afternoon lawn toward her cottage. "Coffee'll be ready in a few minutes," she said, stepping forward to hug him.

He disentangled himself. "You knew I was coming here?"

She smiled, hugged him again and retreated inside to her parlor. "Come on in, darling."

He stopped in the center of the cozy room, glancing at the bright fire in the small brick fireplace. "There's something I want to talk to you about, Sara."

Settling into an armchair, legs tucked under her, she said, "Want to wait until we've had our coffee?"

"No, I...." He paused, took a slow deep breath in and out. "Look, Sara, how old are you?"

She looked up at the beamed ceiling, forehead wrinkling slightly. "Let's see, I was born in 1897," she said after a moment. "So that'd make me.... Darn, I've never been that good at math. Why don't you do the figuring and — "

"Never mind." He dropped down on the sofa. "The point is that you are in cahoots with Font and Inza. Our whole damn relationship is — "

"I wouldn't say cahoots, Paul," Sara told him. "My situation is that I pretty much have to do what Lazlo tells me. It's, you know, part of the vampire deal. Since he's the one who initiated me into — "

"Christ, I've been sleeping with a vampire." He stood up, abruptly. "Sounds like the title of some lousy B-movie on Turner Classics. *I Slept with a Vampire.*"

"You're upset, darling," Sara said with sympathy. "But, really, I am fond of you. And, so I've been told more than once, there's very little difference between sleeping with one of the undead and with a contemporary female. Really."

"That's comforting." He sat back down on the sofa. Then popped upright again. "How many guys have you slept with since 1897?"

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Sara shrugged. "I told you I'm not very good at math."

He commenced, in a sort of jagged way, pacing the cozy parlor. "Why did they set me up with you?"

"Inza, as you well know, Paul, is very fond of you," she explained. "She was hoping she could persuade you to move into the mansion and join her coven without any help from outside."

"She couldn't have done that."

"When she realized it, she consulted with Lazlo and he sent me here to see what I could do about persuading you."

He nodded. "So you're a recruiter. You didn't really give a damn about me. Hell, you probably never even really read any of my books."

"No, dear, I did read one of them. It wasn't as good as I pretended, but really not too terrible." She rose to her feet. "I do like you, although you have to realize that I've known a lot of other interesting men. In over a century, one is bound to encounter — "

"Okay." He moved toward the door. "I know what I have to do and it's get rid of Count Font and the whole witch coven."

"Simpler to join them," advised Sara. "I'd be willing to continue our friendship if you did that. You really don't want to annoy Lazlo or Inza."

He yanked the door open, went running to his car.

He started the engine, gunned it, and swung out onto Gallows Hill Road and away from Sara's cottage.

As the car rushed along the tree-lined road, he reached into the coat pocket where he'd put the protective medallion.

"Damn." The St. Norbert's medallion was gone. "She picked my pocket while she was hugging me."

Didn't matter. He grabbed his cell phone up off the passenger seat. He'd call Truex, tell him the location of the count's coffin. That would start the process.

He started to dig the IOPO agent's card out of another pocket. He stopped, slowed his car, grew thoughtful.

Dropping the phone down on the seat cushion, he said aloud, "Hey, plenty of time to contact. But it just occurred to me that now that I have quite a bit of money, I ought to start buying a few things for myself." He nodded, smiling. "And I've always wanted a motorcycle."

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Around these parts, Matthew Hughes is best known for his tales of penultimate Earth, particularly the stories of Henghis Hapthorn and of Guth Bandar. This month, however, we find Mr. Hughes using a more contemporary setting as the starting point for this particular strand of speculation....

Petri Parousia

By Matthew Hughes

A RESEARCH SCIENTIST IS someone who cannot rest content within the confines of existing knowledge, but always itches to know what is over the horizon.

Or it's somebody who doesn't know to leave well enough alone.

Either definition would fit Wally Applethorpe. So it was natural for him to stay on at Yale School of Medicine on a research fellowship, while I couldn't wait to get out and start cutting people open to give them new knees and hips and other useful parts in return for a six-figure income.

In our last year together, Wally had got interested in DNA. Nothing wrong with that, of course. There are plenty of useful things to do with DNA, from catching serial killers to editing congenital diseases out of the gene pool. I suppose you can even make a case for the idea of "improving" the species by making people stronger or more germ-resistant, or whatever he was getting up to in his lab over behind the red brick Farnham Building.

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I admit, I could never totally fit my mind around what he was doing. If I could have, maybe I wouldn't have become a surgeon. To me, the human body was not a quasi-metaphysical mystery to be unraveled. It was a kind of soft machine whose parts could be repaired when they broke down, or — even better — replaced entirely with materials God would have used if He'd only had access to teflon and stainless steel.

But to Dr. Wally Applethorpe, full-weight genius and Bentham Research Fellow Extraordinaire, the human being was an infinite series of nesting boxes, like those wooden Russian dolls, one inside another. As soon as he got one open, he'd discover another, smaller one inside, and he'd get busy trying to find his way in, world without end.

I moved up to Boston, joined an existing medical group as their bone man, and got busy in my own way: marriage, mortgage, membership in a decent country club. I received regular emails from Wally — "Keeping in touch" was always the subject header — to which I replied as briefly as I knew how. You may not know many real geniuses, but let me tell you: close up, over the long term, they can truly get on your nerves.

Then late one morning he showed up at my office. Sharon, the receptionist, was still buzzing me to ask if I wanted to receive an unscheduled visitor when he walked right through my door and said, "Jimmy-boy, you've got to see this."

By reflex, I said, "Don't call me Jimmy-boy. It's Jim, or James, or what the hell, Dr. Feltham."

He gave me that look he always used to give me, the *Let's not make a big deal out of nothing* look (although it seemed to me his whole life was about making big deals out of next to nothing), and said, "I've got to show you this!"

Now, someone who didn't know Wally Applethorpe might think that the logical response to his statement would be, "What?" But I'd spent three years in a grungy New Haven apartment with him, so my question was, "Why?"

He blinked and put on that expression of astounded innocence that went with the clear blue eyes, perpetually pink cheeks, and shock of corn-yellow hair. "Because you're my friend," he said.

"I'm not your friend, Wally," I said. "I'm just a guy who wound up rooming with you because I couldn't find anything cheaper. Why don't

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you try to think of us as strangers who got stuck in an elevator and then happily went their separate ways?"

At which he gave me his *You old kidder, you* look and launched into the matter that had brought him here. "Give me some blood," he said, pulling a specimen kit out of his pocket.

This time, my response was the same as anybody's would have been. "Why?"

"So I can show you what I've been doing."

"Why?"

He sighed indulgently. "'Cause you're going to want to get in on the ground floor of this. I'm launching a company, got some backers, going to make some big buckazoids, do a lot more research. Sky's the limit. So naturally I thought of my old buddy, Jimmy-boy."

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, "I'm not your old buddy," but another part of my brain weighed in and said to me, *Just 'cause he's an annoying little twerp doesn't mean he isn't brilliant. How many people could stand Bill Gates before he was a multi-billionaire*?

I rolled up my sleeve and he efficiently took ten ccs out of me. "Now what?" I said.

"I'll be back tomorrow," he said, "to show you."

"That's kind of a long commute from New Haven."

"Didn't you get my email?" he said. "I'm just six blocks from here now. Hey, you free for lunch?"

I pleaded an urgent, though imaginary, consult with Jag Sharma, our geriatrics specialist. And, thank God, I did genuinely have a couple of hip replacements scheduled for the afternoon, which allowed me to ease him out the door while he was still bubbling about how it was just like the good old days, the two amigos back in the saddle again. But after he had gone, I wondered how I would keep him at a manageable distance.

I went out front to plot strategy with Sharon. "What a sweet guy," was her opening comment, which was just what girls always said about Wally. Of course, they hadn't had him at full strength and close quarters for three years. Or maybe it was just me. Either way, and notwithstanding the puzzled look she gave me, I worked out a system with Sharon: she would buzz me the moment she saw Wally out in the elevator lobby and heading for the glass doors. That would give me time to get into somebody else's

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office and close the door before he could inflict himself on me at will. With Wally, I had found that control was the key to maintaining sanity.

But, of course, he was beyond control; so the system failed on its first test. Impatient with the slowness of our elevators, Wally came up the fire stairs and was past Sharon and halfway to my office before she could buzz me with the code words, "Mrs. Arkwright to see you."

So Wally caught me, my desk spread with insurance forms, which meant I couldn't plead any urgencies to justify shortening his visit. He carried a small plastic case, like an insulated lunch box, from which he removed a set of petri dishes with transparent covers. They were marked with numbers and names. The names were familiar.

"What is this?" I said.

He touched one of the covers. Its label read STANLEY FELTHAM. "That's your granddad," he said.

Next to it was a dish labeled ROSE (MAGUIRE) FELTHAM. "And your grandma."

The two other dishes were labeled with the names of my mother's parents.

"What is this?" I said again.

"I've isolated each of your grandparents' DNA," he said, giving me that wide-eyed, farm-boy look that meant he had cracked open another doll.

"How?"

So now, finally, he explained. He could unravel a subject's DNA to separate what each of that person's parents had contributed to the mix. It involved microlasers and several kinds of enzymes — cutters, movers, and assemblers, he called them — and the whole process was handled by a super-fast computer that could sort through all the possible combinations and find the one that was true.

"I patented the process and we're going public in a few weeks," he said. "Write me a check for five grand and I'll give you stock warrants that will be worth two percent of the company."

"And what will the company be worth?" I said.

"Why, billions," he said.

"Why?" I said. "What will people do with their grandparents' DNA?"

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He shrugged. "I suppose some of them will put it into an egg, insert it into a womb and give birth to grandma or grandpa. Most people have fond memories of their grandparents — from childhood, that is — but by the time the kids are old enough to really get to know them, the old folks are getting ready to shuffle off this mortal coil. Or they're senile."

"Okay," I said, and thought about it. My mother's parents had died before I was born and the world would thank me for not creating another Stan Feltham: there was already an oversupply of sourpusses. "Supposing there is a market for grandparent clones. It can't be worth billions."

He waggled his hands on either side of his head. "Think, man," he said, then he spread them wide as if offering the whole world. "We're not just talking grandparents. We can go way back. Way, way back."

"How way?"

"Wa-a-a-ay, way."

"Give me a for instance," I said.

He moved the petri dishes aside and sat on the corner of my desk. "Got any famous ancestors?"

There was a legend in the family on my mother's side that we were descended from one of Benjamin Franklin's illegitimate sons. My mother had never been sure whether she should brag about it or hush it up. I told Wally about it.

"Ben Franklin?" he said. "Really? How come you never mentioned this?"

"I guess it never came up."

I probably had mentioned the Franklin connection at some point, but I wasn't surprised that Wally had missed it. In any discussion, he usually did most of the talking; listening was not among his alpha-level attributes.

"Well," he said, picking up one of the dishes that contained my maternal ancestors, "how'd you like to have Ben Franklin as your own son?"

I thought about it and he read my face. "And how much would you pay to be able to do that?" he said.

I wasn't actually thinking about me raising a young Ben Franklin. Chances were he would have been a handful and a half. I was thinking about all the people who named their kids Jared or Jessica some other J-name just because it was that year's fashion. They never thought about

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what it would be like for the poor kid to be one of four or five identically named people in every group they'd ever join, never thought about how the kid would feel knowing that that most personal of possessions, one's own name, had been chosen merely because it was popular and because their parents were irredeemably shallow.

I was thinking about just how many such people existed and how many of them were willing to spend their bank accounts to remain in vogue. "Should I make the check out to you or the company?" I said.

And so we were in business.

AND A VERY GOOD business it was. Wally's company — Ancest, he called it — caught the world's eye and the world's ear. The backers had poured in plenty of start-up money, a good portion of which went into a saturation ad campaign on network television. Within days, Leno and Letterman were making jokes about their imaginary ancestors, Regis and Kelly were interviewing Wally live, and the stock price hit two hundred a share, then split. It was structured as a straight-out franchise operation and the prospective franchisees were fighting each other to get in the door.

"Come work with me," Wally said. He offered me a salary that was one figure more than the six I'd been getting as an orthopedic surgeon, plus options, expense account, corner office, company Lexus.

I said, "What on Earth can I do for you?"

"It's medical research. You're a doctor."

"I'm just a bone cutter."

He gave me his bashful Tom Sawyer look and said, "You're my touchstone. Everybody else, they're always slapping me on the back and telling me what a brilliant researcher I am. You don't do that. You're the only one keeps my feet on the ground, Jimmy-boy."

I should have run for the hills. Instead, I took the corner office with the title of Executive Vice President on the mahogany door behind which I did a lot of not very much, while being well paid for my exertions. It turned out, though, that there was one chore Wally wanted me to take over.

"I'd like you to interface with the backers," he said. "Give me less

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time in meetings, more time in the lab. I've got some interesting projects on the burners."

"Okay," I said. I figured it wouldn't be too onerous a task to schmooze the money people, dazzle them with a little science and set visions of sugar-plum dividends dancing in their heads. Thus armored in my innocence I walked into the Wednesday afternoon board meeting with a fat folder of glowing results from the first few weeks and even shinier projections for the next three quarters.

"We've blown right through the granddad and granny market, and we're into a serious run on major historical figures," I said. "Now that the federal court has ruled that DNA from more than four generations back is public domain, it's not just Robert E. Lee's descendants who can have him for a son; we estimate we'll sell him to about five percent of the population below the Mason-Dixon Line. Plus the interest in European monarchs is picking up, particularly the Bourbons."

I had plenty more, but I was strongly sensing that the five men in black suits on the other side of the table didn't give a damn. I set aside the bar charts on eighteenth-century poets and nineteenth-century composers and said, "Gentlemen, am I missing something?"

"Project Parousia," said the Chairman of the Board. He was a big, stone-faced man with eyes that had had a lot of practice at weighing and winnowing his fellow human beings. I had the feeling I was close to being assigned to the giant bin labeled *Chaff*.

I shuffled through my papers but I knew there was nothing in there about any Project Parousia. I'd never heard of it, although the name rang a faint bell.

"I don't have any information on that project," I said.

"Then get some," said the Chairman. "Or get Applethorpe up here." The other board members nodded, their jaws grimly set, and I realized that they were all cut from the same block of close-grained hardwood as the Chairman. Now that I inspected them closely, I saw that they didn't have the sleek, well-nourished look common to the upper links of the corporate food chain. Instead, each had the aspect of the zealot; they might have been carried over from some previous era when the most popular pastimes were burning witches and crushing heretics under piles of boulders.

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"We'll be back tomorrow," he said. "Be prepared to tell us what we want to know."

I went down to the lab. It was below ground and behind a number of thick steel doors and an even larger number of men who wore uniforms and sidearms. At the last door, even my senior executive pass was not enough to get me through, but I managed to convince the head guard to buzz Wally and he told them to admit me.

When I came into the lab he was bent over the monitor of a scanning electronic microscope, humming to himself. Without looking up, he said, "I think we've made it all the way back to Cro-Magnon man. In a week or two, I should be ready to clone a prehuman hominid. After that, Jimmy-boy, I'm going to get some birds and work back toward the dinosaurs."

"What's Project Parousia?" I asked. My teeth chattered a little. The air was chilly; the large room was designed to keep its banks of super-fast computers happy. Humans could put on a sweater.

"Oh, just a bee in the board's bonnet," he said, looking up for a moment. "Don't worry about it."

"No bee would survive a second in any bonnet of theirs," I said. "Who are those people?"

He had turned back to his monitor. "Backers," he said. "Money people."

I put a hand on his shoulder and pulled him down to my lowly plane. "No," I said. "They're not. Tell me how you found them."

I could see him consulting the part of his memory where he stored irrelevant details. "I didn't," he said, after a moment. "They found me. After I published my paper on retrogressive DNA sequencing, they came to see me."

"It was their idea to set up the company?"

"Uh huh."

"But they're not interested in our actual results and revenue projections."

He looked mildly puzzled. "They're not?"

"No, the only thing they care about is Project Parousia."

"Hmm," he said, and gestured to a lab bench across the room. "It's over there."

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His microscope was pulling him back to wherever he went when he was working, but I exerted a more immediate level of force and pushed him over to the Parousia bench. He examined a series of petri dishes connected to sensors and probes that were in turn linked to one of the big computers, then checked a stream of data that was zipping across a monitor.

"Almost done," he said. "Of course, it's just fantasy."

"What is?"

"Their idea."

"Tell me about it," I said.

Wally said he figured that the board had gotten themselves all wrapped up in that goofy book about a secret society that had protected the descendants of a union between Jesus and Mary Magdalene through two thousand years. I hadn't read the book but I had heard about misguided enthusiasts trying to dig up church floors to get at supposed clues.

I saw it now. "They want you to work backward through the DNA until you've got a clone of Jesus." And now I remembered what parousia meant. It was Greek for the Second Coming.

"They want to bring on the end of the world," I said.

Wally was the only person I'd ever heard use the word "Pshaw." He used it now, then added, "It's just a myth."

"Work with me a moment," I said. "Suppose it isn't a myth. Suppose there really is a secret society. 'Cause I'm thinking if there ever was a secret society of religious fanatics they'd look an awful lot like our board of directors."

"Still," he said, "what are the chances they could be right?"

"I don't know," I said, "but how much research could you get done if the seas are boiling and we're all being pitched into a lake of fire?"

"That's not going to happen."

"Okay, suppose all you give them is a mild mannered carpenter — aren't they likely to think you've teamed up with the Antichrist to wreck their plans? 'Cause they don't look like the kind of people who would get their lawyers in and sue. I'm thinking, they're more the pitchforks and torches kind."

At that moment the Parousia Project's computer emitted a discreet *ding*. Wally leaned over and picked up the last petri dish in the series. He

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peered into it. "There it is," he said then looked around. "But I don't see any angels or wise men."

"Fine," I said. "Tomorrow I'll give it to them and maybe they'll go away happy." Though I didn't think so. But planes left for obscure corners of the world every hour, and I would have enough time to pick a good one.

Except that I noticed how Wally was looking at the dish with that expression I'd seen so many times before. He had found another doll he could crack open.

"No," I said, and reached for the dish. "For once, leave well enough alone."

But he had already slipped it back into its connective armature and his fingers rippled across the computer's keyboard.

He turned to me with that smile of genius I'd seen so often before, the one that is a virtual twin to the grin of madness. "I can prove it's a myth," he said, "You see, if that's really Jesus, the Son of God, then half its DNA is Mary's and the other half is...."

Ding went the computer.

Behind him, from the lab bench, a light glowed.

I turned to run, but the floor shook and the walls cracked and I was thrown down.

I looked up and saw that the petri dish was enveloped in a flame that burned yet did not consume, and a voice that came from everywhere at once said, "Put off the shoes from thy feet for the place where thou standest is holy ground."

"Oh, God," I said.

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Steven Popkes lives in Massachussetts and is currently working with NASA on the Ares I. He gives credit for this story to his son Ben, who used to play soccer (using pine cones) with his father while they waited for the school bus. One day, Ben made a suggestion that triggered this fun tale of sports and sauropods.

Bread and Circus

By Steven Popkes

HIS PHONE RANG AS HE WAS setting up for the game. He switched over, audio only. "Paderewski."

"Mike — "

"Barney, I've got to talk to the team. It'll have to wait — you know how they are."

"Mike! Don't switch off. I just talked to Jim Matteson."

Mike hesitated. "Who is?"

"Husband of Kimberly Matteson who used to be Kimberly Ross. Who is the niece of Commissioner Hack Ross."

Mike sighed. "Rumors. There are always rumors. You always get wound up on these end-of-season games."

"This isn't a rumor, Mike. Ross is going to add another team to the majors."

"That's not funny, Barney."

"It's not a joke. They're going to elevate one of the minor teams. You know who it's got to be: us or the Legs. Who else is there?"

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Major league. As in wholly better than minor league. As in a real budget. As in not being owned by some other major team.

"Arizona," Mike said half-heartedly. "Miami."

"Screw them both. It's always us or the Legs in the playoffs. Are they going to elevate a team that's worse than we are?"

Mike thought for a moment. "Who else knows?"

"I haven't told anybody else. But other than that, I don't know."

Mike rubbed his face. "Don't tell anybody. Not a soul."

"You got it."

The line went dead. Mike wanted to throw the cell to the floor and stamp on it. Dance for joy at the chance. Dance in frustration that his luck couldn't be that good. What would the team think? What would Myrna think?

Instead, he turned and entered the locker room. A thick, fetid odor of carnivore washed over him. Fifteen tons of therapod looked up as he came in the door. He could tell by the splattering on the wall that somebody hadn't made it to the stalls in time. Pre-game jitters.

Their teeth gleamed as they watched him. He rubbed his hands together. Time to get to work. Play it close. Play it easy.

"Okay, team," he began. "Listen up."

Al: Welcome to another episode of Monday Night Sports brought to you on the Hopkinton public access feed. I'm Albert Staab, Senior at Hopkinton High School.

John: And I'm John Albermarle. Also senior at Hopkinton High School.

Al: Tonight we get to bring you the sport we love, DinoBall. Also called Dinosaur Soccer or Sauro-Futball.

John: It should have a better name. DinoBall sounds like something you'd play in an arcade.

Al: Tonight, it's the Minor League final playoff for the East Coast Division. It looks like a good game tonight.

John: That's right, Al. It's the Scranton Legs versus the Providence Braves. There's no love lost between these teams.

Al: They've been rivals for, well, years. The Legs have been playoff champions of the division six of the last seven years.

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John: That sure hasn't made any friends in Providence. Each of those championship matches were between the Braves and the Legs. The Braves are hungry for a win.

Al: I don't think it looks good for Providence. There's a rumor that the Legs are going to take Sebastian Genzyme off the disabled list.

John: Tom Vertech isn't going to be happy about that. He's the one who put him there.

Al: Cool. This could have the makings of a grudge match.

John: Yeah. Any idea why they hate each other so much?

Al: The coaches of both teams have been closed mouthed about it. It's pretty unusual among the late Cretaceous therapods. Up in the majors, don't the Miami Mosasaurs have a Spinosaurus goalie and a T. Rex center?

John: Stan Merck and Tam Lilly. Both left and right wings are Velociraptors.

Al: Not a bad combination.

John: Then again, San Francisco has a Gigantosaur goalie with an entire line of Allosaurs.

Al: There's a lot of friction in San Francisco.

John: It was a bad trade. Allosaurs rarely get along with any of the larger carnivores. But I've heard that the friction between Sebastian and Tom goes back to the days when they were both in the majors playing for the Saint Louis Claws under Mike Paderewski.

Al: When Saint Louis demoted Paderewski to Providence they sent Tom with him and traded Sebastian to the Legs. Do you think Sebastian resents that?

John: Could be, Al. Or maybe neither of them liked getting dumped from the Claws. It's going to be an exciting game. We'll be right back after these public service announcements.

Mike didn't see Sebastian when he followed his team past the bleachers. Maybe what he'd heard was wrong. Maybe the rumors were just rumors. He pointedly ignored the Legs warming up on the other side of the field.

He ran the starting two wings in a quickness drill and watched them

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dribble the twenty-five-pound ball effortlessly. That was the fun part of the job: watching the Velociraptors run.

A shadow loomed over him and he heard harsh breathing. Oh, yeah, he said to himself. That's the other part of the job.

"Is it true, Mike?" Tom bumped him with his head and almost knocked him over. "Is Sebastian going to play today?"

Tom's head was only level with Mike's eyes, not towering over him like a full-sized T. Rex. Tom was about one-eighth size: one-inch teeth, six-foot legs, eight-foot tail. It didn't matter. An ancient mammalian shiver rubbed its way up Mike's spine every time Tom walked near him.

"So what? So you can go for him again and lose the game?"

Tom ignored him. He scanned the other side of the field. "He's not there."

"Tom, we can win the playoffs this time," pleaded Mike. "We can get it all back. We can take them. If you just ignore him — "

Tom looked down at him briefly then stared back at the Legs. "He's not here," he said with satisfaction. "I must have hurt him pretty bad when I checked him."

Mike buried his head in his hands. "Which got you thrown out of the game and we lost, six to two. We had it in the bag, Tom!"

Tom walked away without reply and started stretching with the Velociraptors.

Mike sighed and looked over to the Legs for himself. No Sebastian. His breathing eased. Maybe it was just a rumor. Good.

He hooked up the transceiver and started making suggestions first to Victor, the left wing. Then, he took his two defensive Megalosaurs to task for not covering the holes fast enough. He heard the rippling tone on the transceiver and switched over to his cell.

"Mike here."

"Honey, I've been thinking." Myrna always started a conversation that way. It gave Mike a sinking feeling.

"Yes?" He switched channels and yelled at Victor. "Stretch your tail and your talons together. You can't stretch them one at a time. "

" — so the toilet is loose on the floor. The plumber came in and said the floor would have to be ripped up. I called the tile man and he's come and says we have to select a whole new color."

"That sounds okay." Switched channels again. "Tom, you've got to

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warm up just like everybody else." Tom snarled at him across the field but started stretching his tail.

" — they look as good as they're going to be. I want you to look, too."

"I trust your judgment, honey," he said, then quickly changed channels to the staff line. "Barney, we're going to be ready to start soon and the water jugs aren't out. See to it." Then, back to Myrna.

" — so he's going to call you in about half an hour."

"All — what? I can't talk to him in the middle of a game. It's the playoff."

"Mike, you have to take an interest some time. It's your home, too. It's not my fault we're in Providence."

"But — "

"There are no 'buts' here. I've done all the leg work. I just want you to make sure I haven't missed anything."

"It's the middle of the game!"

"You can't take a short phone call?" in that brittle voice Mike knew so well.

"Okay," he said defeated. "I can give him a minute."

Mike hung up and watched his team. This is going to go well, he thought with a certain amount of satisfaction. They win. They go on after the championship — the East Coast Division is easily the strongest. If they don't mess up, they had the cup. Who was Ross going to pick then? The losing team?

At that moment, every one of the saurians stopped what they were doing and stared over at the Legs' side of the field.

Mike closed his eyes. He knew exactly what had happened.

John: Wow. Look at those muscles. Are you sure he's within the weight limit?

Al: Sebastian weighed in yesterday at three thousand, nine hundred and eighty-seven pounds, well inside of the one-to-two-ton range.

John: He must have starved himself for a week before the weigh-in. He's got to be two and a half tons, at least.

Al: According to a press release I've just been handed, Sebastian has been undergoing some radical gene therapy to increase his muscle mass. That'll make him even tougher to beat.

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John: Or for Tom to hurt him again. Coach Paderewski has his work cut out for him.

Al: The Legs have always like big players, preferring a straight forward line of Charcaradontasauruses backed up by Gigantasaurs on defense. Even so, historically the Braves have been thought the better team.

John: It's Coach Paderewski's creative use of the mix, Al. The Velociraptors are very fast — much faster than the Legs' wings or defense. When they need muscle in a center, they have Tom, the fastest T. Rex in the league. Then, when they turn to defense, Tom is just as big a presence and he's backed up with the two Megalosaurs.

Al: But the Velociraptors are always getting hurt.

John: Absolutely. I think Paderewski considers them disposable. With the unlimited replacement rule, they pretty much are.

Al: The players are lining up at the center of the field. Let's go live to Price Chopper Field.

Tom managed to restrain himself for the first quarter. It was just straight passing plays — the only way the Braves' forward line could survive against the Gigantosaurs. When the Legs tried to come in, Tom fell back, not even trying to get to Sebastian. He just worked with defense to return the ball to the Legs' zone. Mike began to breathe easier.

In the middle of the second quarter, a Legs wing lost the ball and Victor Russogen picked it up. He ran up the center of the Legs' zone and slipped between the two Gigantosaurs. He leaned to one side and grabbed the ball with the claws of his left foot. Mike had just enough time to think remember the three-second rule! when Victor let fly a beautiful shot to the inside right corner.

Sebastian stepped forward and snagged it and threw it back across most of the quarter-mile field. The Legs' forwards had dropped back but now surged to meet the falling ball. The right wing bounced it off a bony skull plate to the left wing who caught it on his tail and slammed it over Carly's head into the net.

Tom roared and ran back to Carly. He slammed Carly's chest with his tail, roared again.

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At that point, the tile man called.

"This isn't a good time," Mike yelled above the rumble on the field.

"Andrew. Call me Andrew. Your wife said I could call."

Carly staggered back into the net. Carly had always been the most affable member of the team but this was too much. He slammed back.

"Your wife said you had to choose between Daffodil Yellow or Cream Yellow."

"What's the difference?" Mike started running onto the field. He didn't like where this was going.

"Tell you the truth, I'm color blind. I only went into this business because my father wanted me to. I wanted to be a musician."

The resounding whacks between Carly and Tom sounded like gunshots. Victor ran between them to stop it.

"No!" Mike yelled across the field.

"I suppose you're right. My being a musician has nothing to do with tile. I think your wife's partial to Daffodil."

Tom brought those jaws down on Victor and flung him off the field. Victor screamed.

"Daffodil!" shouted Mike and switched over to the staff channel to get Doc Wilson.

Tom shook himself and looked around. He saw Victor writhing by the net. Tom shook his head and backed away.

Victor lay still, panting. Wilson came up at a dead run and slapped patchaderm kits on all of the open wounds. The patchaderm foamed like bad beer and then set hard, showing the extent of each wound by a distinctive color. Wilson ignored them, concentrating on correctly fastening the leads on Victor's neck. He sank them deep into the flesh and looked at the readout. Wilson visibly relaxed. He gestured at the readout. "No broken bones or neurodamage. Just nasty trauma. These guys are built tough."

Mike nodded and put a call down to the substitute pen. Victor was out of the game. "Warm up Vern. He's got five minutes."

Al: Whoa! Tom must be on a hair trigger tonight. That's a costly mistake.

John: That's right. Not only is Victor now on the disabled list, the

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referees are flagging a five-minute penalty on the Braves for unnecessary roughness against a fellow team member. So the Braves will have to play short-handed.

Al: That's longer than roughing against an opposing team member. Why?

John: It's to reinforce sportsmanship, Al. Players have to be reminded that they're on the same team. It also gives the Coach time to warm up a substitute player. It looks like Vernon HeBei is going to be Victor's substitute. That could be exciting. This is his first time in the playoffs.

Al: On another note, did you see the shot Victor made on Sebastian before Tom roughed him up?

John: I did. The referees timed it at 1.6 seconds.

Al: The three-second rule doesn't mean anything to a Velociraptor, does it?

John: No, it doesn't. They're just so fast that three seconds is a lifetime to them. That's plenty long enough to set up and deliver any shot they want. That's one reason Coach Paderewski uses them.

Al: Maybe three seconds is too long. Should they shorten it?

John: It's been controversial for some time. Like the quarter-mile field. In Europe they use a much longer field. Hand shots are more common but they don't have the same impact on the game.

The score stayed one/nothing for the rest of the second quarter. Tom seemed to lose interest in the game. Instead, he coasted along with the pack, passing the ball when he got it. At the half, Mike took him aside while the others were resting.

"Tom, you've got to wake up."

Tom didn't answer. He just stared at Mike.

"Look, you just lost your head out there. Victor'll be fine."

"You think I'm bent about Victor?" Tom chuckled. "Hell, I just mussed him up a bit to see how he tastes. Next time he won't be so quick to interrupt a discussion."

"Then, what the hell's the matter with you?"

Tom looked at him first with one eye, then with the other. Mike could

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have sworn if Tom could have grinned, he would have.

"Figuring the odds, Mike. Just keeping my thoughts to myself." Tom brought his head low enough that Mike could feel the wetness of his fetid breath. "You know about that, right, Mike?"

Tom laughed and rumbled back onto the field.

What the hell did that mean?

Myrna called.

"Yes," he said mechanically.

"I saw it all. You ought to have a strong talk with him. Biting his own team member."

"Daffodil," Mike said, watching Tom take his place in the center of the field.

"That was my thinking, too. Here I thought we hadn't been seeing enough of each other and you pick the same one I like."

"Got to go, Myrna."

Al: Vern passed it to back to Miguel. Miguel passes it across the field to Vlad. Vlad sends it up field in the air. Sebastian runs out of the goal and snaps a tail on it.

John: He must have a lot of confidence. It's almost like he's daring Tom to come after him.

Al: I think that's what he's doing. Vlad blocks the ball, but the Legs' Guillermo stops it with his chest, goes around Vlad and takes the shot. Carly catches it and kicks it back on the field.

John: Seems like Tom is playing again. Didn't it seem like he was just sleepwalking out there?

Al: It did, John. He's really got to play well now. The Braves are down a goal in the middle of the last quarter and the Legs aren't giving them many opportunities to change the score.

John: Jack Merck, the Legs' right wing, intercepts it and brings it back into the center zone. Tom snags it back, he's not sleeping now. Tom passes to Vern. Vern to Miguel and a tall one back to Tom. He head-butts it but Sebastian blocks the shot. It rolls over to Vlad. Vlad snaps it in, under Sebastian's tail. Nice shot!

Al: That was a nice one. Uh, oh. Sebastian didn't take that very well. Vlad is trying to get away but Sebastian is chasing him.

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John: And here comes Tom. Looks like trouble.

Al: The referees don't want to get in the middle of this one. They're backing off. I can see Coach Paderewski yelling onto the field. Tom is turning away. Sebastian said something. Tom is turning around. I think there's going to be a fight — wow.

John: You said that right. As big as he is, I never would have thought Sebastian could knock Tom off his feet.

Al: Look out. Tom's back up. He's going for him.

"Oh, you're not even listening to me. That's the trouble. With you, the job is everything. Where is the time for us? That was the only good thing I thought might come of this move. We'd have to have time for each other. Maybe we should spend some time apart."

Carly shot the ball back in the field. Jesus, he's good. I need to give him a raise.

"What?" He looked at the mouthpiece of the headset as if she were there. "I don't understand."

"It's likely for the best. You can concentrate on your...game. And we can decide if we should, well, you know, stay together."

"Honey — " The ball was in the air, it shot to the left like a live thing, then like a bird, it slipped past Sebastian. "Yes! Oh, yes." And suddenly he was yelling. They were back in the game.

"Mike, you don't have to take my ear off."

"Sorry." He felt his grin from ear to ear fade. Then, he saw Sebastian start to chase Vlad. "Uh oh."

"Sometimes I don't think we were ever suited." There was a click.

"Bye," Mike said absently as he started running.

Tom went down hard and for a moment, the air seemed stilled. Then, Tom roared back to his feet.

"Stop," yelled Mike.

Tom was unintelligible.

Mike grabbed his tail. "Not this game. Not this time."

Tom swatted at him but Mike wouldn't let go.

Tom noticed him for the first time. He reached around and bit off Mike's arm.

The world seemed to flash suddenly white. Everything slowed down.

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Tom straightened up and stared at Mike. Then spit out the arm, glanced over at Sebastian and turned away, lumbering back into the Braves' zone.

Mike grabbed the end of his spurting arm, clamped down on it — he couldn't hear anything but rumbles and cries. A tourniquet. I need a tourniquet. He looked around. The blood seemed to spurt out in a slow rhythm. He clamped his good hand over the end and squeezed as hard as he could. White fire burned out his vision again and he thought he was going to faint.

Then, Doc Wilson was there.

Al: Have you ever seen anything like it?

John: Never. I don't even know if there's anything in the rules to cover this. Coach Paderewski is being carried off the field. Tom is pacing next to the Braves' goal. Is he saying anything?

Al: I can't make it out. Looks like Assistant Coach Barney Perini is being asked to forfeit.

John: Will they forfeit?

Al: I think they'll have to. Look what's happened.

John: So, it's another trip for the Legs to the series.

Things swam into focus in the ambulance. He looked at his arm. It was a stump below the elbow. There was a cap of patchaderm at the end.

"Did you get it?" He looked over at Doc Wilson.

"Huh?"

Mike reached over with his good hand and released the straps. He sat up and swung his feet over the edge of the stretcher. "Did you get my arm?"

"Sure. It's on ice."

"Good. Keep it there." The EMT's tried to push him back into the ambulance. "Get out of my way." He pushed past them and staggered back into the stadium. Under the bleachers, through that tunnel that always reminded him of a cave, then out onto the field.

"Barney!" he yelled. Where was that son-of-a-bitch? "Barney!"

"Here." Barney was running, followed by three referees.

Mike caught his breath. "Tell me you didn't forfeit."

"I was about to."

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"We don't forfeit. Tell them that."

He pushed them away and walked out onto the field, holding his arm. Tom was pacing back and forth in front of the Braves' goal. Across the field, Sebastian was doing the same in front of the Legs' goal. They were roaring at one another.

"Tom! Tom!" He stood in Tom's way. "Shut up!"

Tom stopped.

Mike stared at him. "Are you ready to play now?"

"What?"

Mike held up the stub of his arm. "You've messed around a lot. You beat up on poor Victor. You got a damn good taste of me. Now, are you ready to play?"

"Play, hell. I want to kill the bastard."

"We're tied. We can still win."

"Why? So you can win and get back in the majors or something? So you can keep your pretty wife happy? Why should I care?"

Sebastian roared at them. Tom roared back.

"You've screwed up every game against Sebastian for six years. You beat him up and the Legs win. Every time. Every time after the playoff, Sebastian gets a bonus and laughs at you. You go over there again tonight and he'll mop the floor with you. He's been planning for this night for six years."

Tom stared at him. He looked over at Sebastian and back to Mike. Back to Sebastian. After a moment, he seemed to grin at Mike. "Okay. I'll play." He went over and started talking with Vern and the defenders. Mike was tempted to follow but he worried that Tom would change his mind.

The referees were waiting for him when he came back to the water table. Mike knew the rules. The worst they could do was give them a five-minute penalty. Vlad took it for Tom.

The heavy ball came out of the zone like a rocket. Miguel bounced it back into the center zone where it was snagged by Vern. Vern dribbled it over to one side, drawing fire. Then, he popped it in the air and head-butted it to Tom.

Tom stopped it with his chest and when the ball hit the ground, he covered it with his foot. Mike automatically started counting: one.

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Tom continued forward onto his other foot, then rolled in midair, cocking the foot with the ball as limber and graceful as if he'd been a Velociraptor himself.

He's been practicing this, he thought with awe. Still counting: two.

Tom let go, all thirty-two hundred pounds of muscle behind the ball. It shot across the field inhumanly fast. Sebastian never had time to move. It struck him right in the chest and broke right through his ribs and stomach, almost breaking out his back.

Sebastian looked at the hole, then at Tom, then fell slowly forward.

The bending of his body popped the ball out his back and it rolled gently into the goal.

The whistle blew.

Al: If that's not the best finish to a game I've ever seen —

John: The referees have just ruled that Tom did not violate the three-second rule.

Al: Did they have a roughness call on Tom?

John: No. They've decided nothing illegal happened and the goal is legal.

Al: It's official. Viewers at home heard it here first. The Braves are going to the series for the first time in six years.

John: Stay tuned for the post-game analysis. After that, we'll bring you films and analysis of the Gorilla Sumo matches in Japan. Keep watching.

Mike looked at the cast. It looked garish in the fluorescent lights of the medical bay. "Thanks."

"You won't thank me when the painkillers wear off," said Wilson. "But you'll be in fine shape for the series."

"So my hand will be okay?"

"Oh, yeah. I froze it as soon as you ran off. That's why it's really going to hurt."

"It's still pretty amazing you can just plug it back in."

"You people play games with pint-sized dinosaurs and you think that's amazing?" Wilson laughed and gave him a bottle of pills.

As soon as Wilson was out the door, Myrna came in. She looked different — same short hair, same tiny nose. Eyes were the same color but

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wet: she'd been crying.

He didn't have time to see much more. She was hugging him. "You got your arm bit off. I'm going to smack Tom."

"He didn't mean it."

"He did. He's a dinosaur. He can't help but mean it."

Mike didn't argue. He liked the feeling of her breasts beneath her shirt. He liked the way she talked. He liked her smell. He could tell things were going to get better. He had a feeling for these things.

She pulled back and looked at him and he figured out what it was.

"What's the white stuff on your face?" He touched it. It felt like sand.

"Tile dust."

"Ah." He started to take both her hands, thought better of it, took only one.

She smiled and it made the whole room light up. They didn't speak for a moment.

"I almost missed you today," she said in a faint, scared voice.

He understood she wasn't going anywhere. "Me, too." Mike nodded and took a deep breath. "Me, too."

COMING ATTRACTIONS

"OH, I WISH I WAS in the land of cotton," goes the song "Dixie's Land." "Old times there are not forgotten." But you won't want to look away from Albert Cowdrey's "The Overseer" unless you want to miss a historical fantasy of the finest caliber. Next month's cover story gives us a wonderful perspective on the unsavory, rough-and-tumble world of Louisiana in the decades after the Civil War. Don't miss this one.

On a lighter note, we also have a fractured fairy tale slated to run in our March issue, compliments of Nancy Springer. "Rumple What?" revisits one of the the more familiar tales of the Brothers Grimm (need we say which one?) with very interesting results.

We've also got stories coming soon from Alexander Jablokov, Rand B. Lee, Rachel Pollack, M. Rickert, and Kate Wilhelm, along with plenty of reviews and columns. If you haven't already subscribed, do so now and make sure you won't miss any of the goodies we have in store!

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

"LOOK, YOU FOOLS. YOU'RE IN DANGER. CAN'T YOU SEE? THEY'RE AFTER ALL OF US. THEY'RE HERE ALREADY."

IT'S A PITY Nicole Kidman spent a decade of marriage to Tom Cruise prepping for her role in *The Invasion*, living with a pod person, pretending to be one, suppressing her emotions, etc., because the movie, as it turns out, simply wasn't worth the sacrifice. Actually, it's difficult to believe that either Kidman, who's made a career out of displaying an icy reserve, or her poker-faced co-star, Daniel Craig (Dr. Ben Driscoll), could be reasonably cast as people who need to control their emotions, but that's not the main problem with the picture.

Initially the project, a third remake of Don Siegel's B-picture classic, *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*, didn't seem like such a horrible idea. Warner Brothers announced that they were bringing over Oliver Hirschbiegel from Germany to direct their A-list cast, Kidman as psychiatrist Carol Bennell, and Craig, the new James Bond, as her deeply smitten, platonic lover. Hirschbiegel had demonstrated in previous films like *The Experiment*, based on the Stanford Prison Experiment, and *Downfall*, the story of Hitler's last days, his ability to handle both action and psychological complexities, and good things might be expected. This version, WB promised us, would be something completely different. But when Hirschbiegel turned in the movie, the studio wasn't happy with the result, calling to mind an old Hollywood joke.

Director: But...you said you wanted something different.

Studio Exec: Yes, but we didn't know it would be *that* different.

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Warner Brothers called upon the Wachowski Brothers to oversee a reshoot of the ending, and the Wachowskis in turn called upon their protégé, James McTeigue *(V for Vendetta)*, to manage the chore. The studio was so pleased with McTeigue's work, they decided to let him reshoot a significant portion of the movie, thus making of it the hybrid creation of two directors with wildly variant aesthetics and aptitudes.

The snippet of dialogue that serves as the title of this column was excerpted from a speech delivered by actor Kevin McCarthy at the end of the original film while running alongside a highway, trying to alert passing cars to the threat of the pod people. Many reviewers have interpreted this speech to have been a warning about either the dangers of communism or that of Senator Joe McCarthy, whose House Un-American Activities Committee engaged in witch hunts and fearmongering to such an extent, they created a nationwide atmosphere of paranoia and mob rule...an atmosphere not unlike the one engendered by the 9/11 attacks and the Bush administration's reaction to them. But if we look closer at the film, we find a deeper meaning, one closer to the intent of Jack Finney's novel. Finney believed mankind had surrendered mastery of its fate to its own inventions and that traditional morals and values were casualties in the "rush to modernize, bureaucratize, streamline, and cellophane-wrap." Witness this speech given by the Kevin McCarthy character, Dr. Miles Bennell, early in the film:

> "In my practice I see how people have allowed their humanity to drain away...only it happens slowly instead of all at once. They didn't seem to mind....All of us, a little bit. We harden our hearts...grow callous...only when we have to fight to stay human do we realize how precious it is."

Or as Don Siegel himself put it:

> "People are pods. Many of my associates are certainly pods. They have no feelings. They exist, breathe, sleep. To be a pod means that you have no passion, no anger, the spark has left you...of course, there's a very strong case for being a pod. These pods, who get rid of pain, ill-health and mental disturbances are, in a sense, doing good. It happens to leave

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you in a very dull world but that, by the way, is the world that most of us live in. It's the same as people who welcome going into the army or prison. There's regimentation, a lack of having to make up your mind, face decisions.... People are becoming vegetables. I don't know what the answer is except an awareness of it."

Dehumanization, then, or more precisely, the suborning of our collective will to inexorable, pacifying forces, be they pods or the media or religion or a marketing campaign, is the central message of the movie.

Philip Kaufman's outstanding 1978 remake spoke to this and further dealt with our nation's post-Vietnam and post-Watergate traumas. Abel Ferrara's worthwhile 1993 remake focused on our misplaced trust in the military-industrial complex. *The Invasion*, seeking a contemporary relevance, waves its hand at a whole shopping cart of issues — Darfur, Iraq, the pharmaceutical industry, AIDS (instead of pods, the villains are alien spores that metabolize in humans when they fall asleep and are transmitted by injection or an exchange of bodily fluids, most often by vomiting) — but none of it sticks. The issue of dehumanization is trotted out, but is declawed by having the characters discuss it as though it was a subject for chit-chat over coffee and doughnuts. And so, lacking a coherent thematic structure, as the numbers of blandly malevolent spore people increase, their numbers swollen by a government-sponsored program of flu injections, *The Invasion* begins to verge on Uwe Boll territory.

There are a number of laugh-out-loud moments during the movie. My favorite is when Carol's ex-husband, Ben, prior to infecting her, while giving the obligatory come-join-us-in-vegetable-bliss speech, asks her to think back to a long-ago vacation when she expressed the wish to become an aspen tree...It's like that, honey. The cocktail party at a foreign embassy that might be a meeting of the Hollywood chapter of the Bad Accent Club deserves mention, but audience reaction was most pronounced when Carol hands a hypodermic loaded with ephedrine to her son Ollie, an uber-cute moppet of five or six, and tells him to inject it into her heart if she falls asleep. Ollie must have gotten in some practice, because when the moment arrives, he performs the task unerringly and unfalteringly, like any superhuman

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five-year-old with a background in emergency room nursing.

It's impossible to know what Hirschbiegel had in mind for the movie and whether it would have worked; but there is some evidence that his take on the materials involved a lower-key, almost documentary approach, focusing more on the psychology of the event than the earlier films, suggesting that Kidman's character may be wound too tightly and, essentially, is having a paranoid fantasy that happens to be coming true. Her mental state is provoked by the actions of her ex-husband, an official with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, whom she suspects of having kidnapped Ollie, thus creating a modicum of tension where before there could be none (though the plot of the movie may be a mystery to some, I doubt this fourth version of the pod people-replacing-humans story holds any surprises for the vast majority of the audience). If ambiguity, or subtlety of any sort, was Hirschbiegel's intention, McTeigue has obliterated almost every trace of it by adding a car chase or three and tacking on a ludicrously upbeat ending that defies common sense, logic, and the fundamental tenets of microbiology, not to mention those of Screenwriting 101, a course that David Kajganich, author of the script, would do well to audit before attempting another project. What remains is a movie in name only, a collection of scenes featuring an increasingly wired-looking Kidman, popping uppers and chugging Mountain Dew, that somehow resolves into a finish with all the brio of a bout of flatulence. It's hard to believe, given the money and talent at their disposal, that they could screw up such a strong story. If you let your paranoia creep just a teensy bit, you might imagine that the pod people in power at Warner Brothers had sabotaged the film, defused its cautionary message, in order to safeguard their path toward world domination.

Danny Boyle's *Sunshine* is not a remake, it merely cribs from half a dozen of its predecessors in the deep-space-mission sub-genre. *2001* to *Alien*...name any similar film, and Boyle's movie quotes from it. You've got your computer with the narcotized voice (you'd suppose they'd have the option to change it, because the one they have could become irritating after a while); you've got your spacewalk to make vital repairs; your mysterious distress signal; your stressed-out crew...and what a crew it is, surely

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the most attractive bunch of Earth-saving astronauts ever assembled. Michelle Yeoh, Chris Evans, Cillian Murphy, Rose Byrne, the hottest Earth-saving pilot since Hilary Swank in *The Core* (a film that *Sunshine* also references). That said, it's a serviceable science fiction thriller for the majority of its running time. Alex Garland's *(28 Days Later)* script offers precious little in the way of originality, but what there is — mainly the crew's developing and perhaps unhealthy obsession with the sun — acts to hold your interest.

The sun, you see, is dying, its core infected by a type of matter left over from the Big Bang, and the crew of the *Icarus 2* (*Icarus 1* having disappeared inside the orbit of Mercury) has been sent to reignite it with a bomb that must be delivered with pinpoint precision. It's Earth's last shot at survival, so naturally all thought of precision goes out the airlock when they receive a distress signal from *Icarus 1* and decide to divert their flight in hopes of acquiring a second payload. Though this strains credulity, as does the screw-up in plotting a new course (you'd think that chore would have been checked and double-checked, and not left to one overtired crew member), I was willing to suspend my disbelief... until the third act, when I began to understand that there was a reason for the annoying subliminals (mostly demented faces) with which Boyle has salted the film — they foreshadow the imminence of a deranged villain, where no villain was really necessary to heighten tension or further the plot. At this juncture, the film lapses into an unintelligible horror movie (*Event Horizon* springs to mind), Grand Guignol laced with spoutings of undergrad philosophy courtesy of said villain, whose appearance suggests that prolonged exposure to the sun at close quarters has caused light to bend and blur in his vicinity, giving him a glossy, out-of-focus look. It's a shame Boyle and Garland didn't stick with the drama and dread that the mission alone inspired — they never should have answered that distress call.

There is some good news for genre film buffs. *Count Dracula*, a 1977 BBC production, is now on DVD. This version hews closely to Bram Stoker's classic tale and may be the best vampire movie ever made. Clocking in at two-and-a-half hours, it features a charmingly menacing Louis Jourdan as the count, Frank Finlay as van Helsing,

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Susan Penhaligon as Lucy, and Judi Bowker as Mina. Aside from some campiness in sound design, I found it an almost flawless adaptation of the novel.

Of less interest to the casual moviegoer, but for fans of Jodorowsky, Tarkovsky, and David Lynch, Andrzej Zulawski's unfinished science fiction epic, *On the Silver Globe*, will be a valuable addition to their DVD collection. Zulawski, who is best known for his beautifully shot and cerebral horror movie, *Possession*, starring Sam Neill and Isabelle Adjani (if you haven't seen it, you're missing out), began *Globe* in 1977, but midway through the principal photography, the Polish government shut the project down. Some ten years later he went back and attempted to sew the film together by means of narration and the result.... Well, it's not very good.

The story concerns a group from a post-apocalyptic Earth who set up a colony on the Moon. Their incest-bred children create a primitive society and worship the oldest astronaut as a god. Years later, another astronaut comes to rescue them and becomes their defender against monstrous black-winged creatures that have enslaved them. Some of Zulawski's imagery has been aped by others in the interim and thus may seem stale, but much of it is stunning and the cinematography is nightmarishly bleak and, while I can't recommend it, a viewing will give you a sense, however fragmentary, of the masterpiece that might have been.

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The husband and wife writing team of Doyle & Macdonald live in New Hampshire with children, cats, and computers. Together, they have more than a score of novels to their credit — and that's not counting the pseudonymous books revealed on their Website. (Your quickest way to find them online is by putting "Madhouse Manor" into a search engine.) Their most recent novel is an alternate history epic entitled Land of Mist and Snow. *"Philologos" is set in the same universe as the novel, but you need not have read the novel to enjoy this tale (the second one in this issue concerning someone who seeks a rare book).*

Philologos; or, A Murder in Bistrita

By Debra Doyle and James D. Macdonald

WILLIAM SHARPS (PH.D., HARVARD, 1844) sat in the dining room of the Coroana de Aur hotel in Bistrita and listened to two men plotting to kill him.

Sharps was dining alone. He was the only American in the room, and possibly the only man who spoke English as a native tongue for a hundred miles in any direction. The whispered conversation between the two would-be murderers was in an Ural-Altaic dialect. Everyone else in the room appeared to be speaking Romanian, German, or Croat.

The language was what had first caught Sharps's interest. The second point was how clear the conversation was. When he glanced around the room, pretending to savor his glass of quite execrable mead, he noted that the two men whom he presumed to be the speakers were seated in a far corner, their heads together, speaking in low tones. He supposed that the geometry of the room made it into a whispering gallery, like that of St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

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He listened more closely. The speakers were referring to an unknown man, a traveler: Sharps noted that the word they used could equally refer to a stranger, a foreigner, or a slave. They were wondering how rich this foreigner was. They wondered if the crime (for they spoke of the foreigner's necessary death) would be better put off until the morrow; but they decided against this, for the foreigner would be away by the post and might slip beyond their grasp.

Sharps was himself planning to be away by the post. He had arrived by train from Vienna in the late afternoon, and, from Bistrita, the way to the University of Brasov was best attempted by coach. Sharps carried letters of introduction from professors at the universities in Heidelberg and Köln. The library at Brasov housed a collection of arcane and metaphysical texts of high repute in scholarly circles; not so broad as the holdings of Wittenberg or Oxford, or of Arkham, but of great depth in the fields of Sharps's particular concern. Among the uncatalogued volumes in such a library, Sharps thought, he might well find the *ür*-text of the *Liber Pallidus*, the so-called Grey Book, which his researches had convinced him must, in fact, vary significantly from the Aldine Press edition of 1501, as well as from extant manuscript sources.

Even if he did not find his hypothesized early manuscript of the *Liber Pallidus*, the library at Brasov might well yield other documents of equal obscurity, perhaps as yet uncatalogued in any form. It was all in furtherance of his research.

He looked about the dining room in the last flare of the April twilight — the arched ceiling, the lamps in brackets on the walls, the candles on the tables — and felt terribly alone. He supposed that he was wealthy by local standards, since he was carrying all of his travel funds with him. A sum that would not be accounted much in Paris or London would seem a fortune to many here.

No one seemed to have heard the whisper but him. Now, as he resumed his meal, he could feel the two men's eyes on his back. Although he was desperately hungry after the long journey by rail, Sharps stood, folded his napkin, and walked into the lobby.

There he took a seat in an old-fashioned wing chair of russet leather, in a place where he could see the door, the clerk's desk, and the stairs leading up to the guest rooms. He took a week-old copy of the *Potsdammer*

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Abendblatt from its place on the end table and pretended to find it fascinating, while awaiting the arrival of the two swarthy men. He doubted if they would attack him here, where the clerk could see them, and where the other guests in the dining room could raise an alarm. No, if he were attacked it would be in his room, asleep.

Soon enough, the two appeared, chatting between themselves, their expressions serious. He did not catch what they were saying. One of the men was older, his bushy mustache graying. They both wore garments of European cut. Neither wore jewelry. Their hair was dark, thick, and slicked back. They were muscular, and bore an air of quiet purpose.

Sharps wondered that such men would choose to follow careers as cutpurses. Perhaps they took on the role of travelers in order to waylay others on the road. He had heard of such — of the Thuggee of India — although these men had nothing about them that suggested so Eastern an origin. As they passed, they paused and looked at him intently. Sharps raised the newspaper and pretended to read.

The two stopped at the desk and spoke to the clerk. No mail awaited them (though the clerk checked). They went up the stairs. They were guests, then, in this hotel.

Sharps stood, laid the paper aside, and followed at a discreet distance. While Sharps watched from the stairs, the men went down the hall, lighted by lamps and carpeted in scarlet, on the first floor. They stopped at a room on the right-hand side, halfway down the corridor. The older man took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door, and the two went in. The door snicked closed behind them.

Sharps continued up to the next floor where his room was situated. He allowed the door to swing fully open before he entered, not sure what he would do if anyone lurked within. The room was empty, holding — other than his bags — only a bed, a washstand, a desk and chair, and a fireplace. The evening was warm; no fire burned in the hearth, though a lighted lamp stood on the mantle.

He walked to the window. Outside, where bright moonlight replaced the fading twilight, he could see the stable yard. He tried the window. It didn't budge. A moment's inspection showed why: the casement was nailed shut and the nails painted over. He pulled the curtains closed.

He decided not to sleep. Not with murderers coming in the night. He

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put his boots in the corridor to be polished, locked the door behind him, then slipped on a pair of low-cut dress shoes from his luggage.

The door opened out into the hall; he could not put a chair under its handle to keep it shut, but he did balance a chair against it, and balance the basin from the washstand on the chair. If the door were to open, it would make a noise.

The only weapons near to hand were the poker from the fireplace, and his penknife. He put both on the washstand where he could find them easily, then extinguished the light and lay back, fully dressed, on the bed.

He must have dozed, for the next thing he remembered was a sound like a mouse running through the walls. The room was dimmer, the moon low in the sky. He rose, pulled a chemical match of his own manufacture from his pocket, and struck a light. He lit the lamp and stood for a moment. His pocket watch told him that the time was a bit after three. He tried the door — still locked. The chimney of the fireplace was too narrow for a man to descend. The window was still nailed shut. He heard no other sounds. After walking about the room for a few minutes, he lay on the bed reading from volume two of Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* until his eyelids grew heavy. Shortly afterward, he blew out the lamp.

His next recollection was in the pale dawn, when there came a tremendous hammering on his door. The washbasin slid from the chair; the chair tumbled on its side.

"One moment!" he called in Romanian, and sprang to his feet. His penknife he held in his right hand, the blade lying out of sight up along his forearm.

With his left hand he unlocked the door. It fairly sprang open. Outside, in the hall, stood two *poliţisti*.

The one to Sharps's right pulled the door farther open and pressed forward, seizing Sharps's right arm and twisting it behind his back. Sharps dropped the penknife.

The other police officer spoke: "In the name of His Imperial and Royal Apostolic Majesty Franz Joseph, By the Grace of God Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary and Bohemia, I arrest you for murder."

Some hours later, as William Sharps sat in a cell in the police station where he had been conveyed by sealed coach, the jailer came with a rattling of keys.

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"What is the time?" Sharps asked, for his pocket watch had been taken from him, as indeed had all of his personal possessions. The linings had been torn from his jacket as well when he was searched at the police station. His protests that he was an American citizen had been met simply with the word "Silence," so silent he remained.

"Not yet noon," the jailer replied, turning the key in the lock of the cell door. "The commissioner wants to talk to you, so keep a respectful tongue in your head."

If penitentiaries were meant to make men feel penitent, Sharps was feeling sorry now. The post-coach to Brasov would have long since departed. Where his passport, where his luggage, where his books were — he did not know. Nor did he know what would become of him, although he reckoned that there had been a simple misunderstanding and all would soon be rectified.

Two policemen escorted Sharps up from the holding cells to rooms paneled in wood and carpeted with wool woven in fantastic patterns. They took him up several stories to a room at the end of a hall. Once inside, he found himself facing a florid-faced, gray-haired man in an expansive blue tunic, choker-collared, red-sashed, and bemedaled after the military fashion, seated behind a wide mahogany desk. High French windows filled the room with light. Sharps recognized a number of his personal effects on the desk: his journal, his penknife, his letters of introduction.

"Bow to His Excellency," the policeman at Sharps's right said, before letting go of his arm and retiring to take guard beside the door. The other policeman left the room, closing the door behind him, presumably to stand guard outside.

Sharps did as he was told, then stood, awaiting further instructions.

"Take a seat," the man behind the desk said, indicating a plain wooden chair that stood before the desk. He spoke in German. "I am Commissioner Haidekker. And you are?"

"William Sharps, from the United States," Sharps said, also in German, and took the indicated seat.

"What brings you to Romania, Mr. Sharps? It is a long way from America."

"I am a student," Sharps replied. "I study words. I wish to consult the libraries in the universities for old books containing old languages."

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"Surely there are enough words in your own country." Without a pause Haidekker switched in midsentence from German to Italian.

"My country is not old enough to have interesting ones," Sharps replied, also in Italian. "But tell me, why am I under arrest? Surely a scholar of antique handwriting can be of no interest to the law."

"A scholar of languages would be a good story for a spy to tell," Haidekker said. He opened Sharps's journal to a page and turned it around. "What is the nature of this code?"

"That," Sharps said, "is Sanskrit, written in the alphabet common in Burma. I copied it out from a codex at the University of Paris. It may indicate that Alexander came earlier to India, and stayed there longer, than is commonly thought among historians."

"You are a historian, then?"

"My interest in that document is the form of the word *amoghabala*, concerning the strength of a horse. In some documents it is spelled otherwise."

"Why did you kill the Hasanaki brothers?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Haidekker stood, leaning forward on his fists, his face redder as he shouted. "Do you take me for a fool? You were looking at them all during dinner. You were seen! You waited for them in the lobby. You were seen! They went to their room, you followed. You were seen! At three this morning their throats were cut, and at that same hour a light was burning in your room. It was seen! This morning you opened the door with a knife in your hand, already dressed, and your bed not slept in. Do not deny it! Now tell me why you killed them, or things will go badly with you."

Sharps recoiled from the other man's fury. "I tell you, I know nothing."

"Many men go to the gallows protesting their ignorance," Haidekker said.

At that moment, a knock sounded on the door.

"Come!"

The outer door opened and the second *polițist* entered. "*Báró Tötösy*," he announced, saluting, as another man entered. The guard within noticeably stiffened in his position of attention. Commissioner Haidekker remained standing, but his posture went from bending forward and scowling to an

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open smile and an extended hand as he walked around his desk. "*Gnädiger Herr!*" said he. "To what does my humble office owe the pleasure?"

Baron Tötösy walked to the sideboard, an impeccable morning coat swishing about his legs, and poured himself a glass of brandy. "The news is all over town of the strange fish you have trawled from our waters," he said, turning back to address Haidekker. He sipped the brandy. Sharps noted the Baron's luxuriously waxed Imperial and his hair, ginger colored, parted in the middle and pomaded to glistening perfection. The Baron's blue eyes twinkled above his ruddy cheeks. "As a scholar myself, I hurried to have a chance to chat with my colleague."

"The charges are serious," Haidekker began, as the Baron strolled to the official's desk and picked up one of the letters of introduction that lay there.

"Herr Doktor Professor Bopp?" the Baron said to Sharps. "You know him?"

Sharps inclined his head. "I have the honor."

"I myself studied in Innsbruck," Tötösy confided, then addressed the Commissioner. "What did you say the charges were?" He had a Magyar accent underlying his German.

"Espionage and murder," Haidekker said. "We can hardly overlook — "

"Stuff and nonsense," Tötösy said. "This man is no more a murderer than I am." He riffled through Sharps's journal, and came to a page written in Cyrillic characters. He waved it in Haidekker's direction. "If this is what concerns you, think nothing of it. It is an account of the Khazars in Taurica, from the ninth century." He flipped the notebook closed.

Now he looked at Sharps directly. "American, eh?" he said in English. "Is it true that in America there are nothing but atheists and freethinkers?"

"No, sir," Sharps replied. "We also have Quakers."

The Baron laughed. "I trust your business dealings are more honest than theirs."

The Baron turned back to Haidekker. "Come," he said, finishing his brandy and putting down the glass on the Commissioner's desk. "Give this man into my care. You may keep his passport until your investigation is done, of course. In the meantime he will give his parole and will be my guest. Should you want him for anything, I will produce him. In the

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meantime, he and I will have much to discuss and he may prove of some small service to me, for which I would be extremely grateful."

The Commissioner turned to Sharps. "Do you give your parole, sir?"

There would be time later, Sharps reflected, to ponder the validity of promises extracted under duress. "I do."

"Then it is settled," Tötösy said. "Have his things delivered to my rooms. I so look forward to conversation with a gentleman scholar here in the provinces! But I digress. Come, come, sir! Arise!"

With that Tötösy led the way from the office, Sharps following, with Haidekker frowning behind them. The *poliţisti* showed no expression at all.

They went down the stairs and out toward the front of the building, where the Baron retrieved his hat from a rack by the door. "Public buildings," he said. "So uncouth. But my carriage waits, see, here it is!"

In front of the police station stood an enameled cream and blue closed carriage, with a gilded crest on the door and two matched chestnuts to pull it. The coachman, an older fellow of great height and thinness, dressed in a brocaded cloak and a beaver hat, stood beside it.

"You must forgive my countrymen," the Baron said as they walked down the marble steps toward the coach. "St. George's Eve approaches, the moon is full, and various of wild and strange doings are rumored. The people are liable to all sorts of fancies, and the police must investigate. I'm sure you understand."

"Surely two men are genuinely dead," Sharps said.

"Surely they are, but they're Turks," said Tötösy, laughing. "Who cares?"

The coachman opened the door and Sharps entered the coach. A young woman in a high-necked white dress, wearing a thin white veil, sat within, facing forward on the left side. Sharps sat opposite her, facing the rear. Baron Tötösy joined them a moment later, sitting beside the woman and taking her gloved hand in his.

"Mr. Sharps," he said, "allow me to present my sister, Sofia."

"Enchanted."

She did not reply.

The door closed, the coach trembled as the coachman gained his box, then a whip cracked and they were off, rattling along the cobbled streets.

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Sharps looked up at the young woman. She sat with eyes downcast. He noticed that she had been weeping.

The carriage took a northerly route, as Sharps observed by the sun and the shadows.

"I hope you will enjoy your time with us," Tötösy said. "Alas, I have minimal staff, just my man and my sister. Yet you Americans are a rough folk; I'm sure you will be comfortable." Tötösy leaned closer. "She cooks."

"I shall be delighted," Sharps said. "But curiosity is my besetting sin. What is the nature of the service of which you spoke?"

"A relative of mine maintains a *château* nearby. Knowing of my scholarly habits, he has desired that I catalog his library. For this I was called from Prague. This cataloging could prove a tiresome task; thus my delight at hearing of the presence of a fellow scholar."

"This is no hardship," Sharps said. "Are there any old books?"

"Indeed, they are for the most part ancient," the baron said. Then turning to his sister: "You see? With a guest our time in the ancestral halls shall in no wise be as dreary as you had feared."

"I thank you, brother," she replied without looking at him.

An hour passed; they stopped and dined from a hamper on roast fowl, bread, and claret. The coachman, if he ate, did so out of their sight.

Two more hours, as the road ascended, and the craggy peaks of the region appeared on either hand, and they came to their destination, a massive stone pile that seemed more *burg* than *schloß*, and more *schloß* than *château*. Sharps alighted into the afternoon sun. The place had a commanding view of the river.

Baron Tötösy stood a moment, chin in hand, looking critically at Sharps. "The police have ruined your clothing. We shall have to provide until your luggage is fetched. The house is yours and all it contains. Come, enter!"

The coachman held the door whilst Sharps, Tötösy, and Sofia entered, then followed. The door boomed closed. Then, to Sharps's surprise, he turned the key in the lock and laid a bar through staples let into the stone on either side.

"Bandits," the coachman said. "Everywhere."

"The horses?" Sharps asked.

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"I see to them. Later."

The entrance hall opened onto a wide stairway, its walls hung with dark tapestries, ancestral portraits, and medieval weapons. Corridors to either side led deeper into the *château*.

The coachman lit a lamp and led Sharps to an upper room with a small mullioned window overlooking the gardens. A bed with velvet curtains in faded red stood against the left wall. The opposite wall held a clothespress.

The coachman gestured toward it. "These fit you, I think," he said. "Dinner at sunset."

With that he turned and left. Sharps found himself unsurprised to hear the key turn in the lock.

He found linen that fit him tolerably in a drawer. The shirts were high-collared in the Magyar fashion, with loose sleeves, fastened with laces rather than buttons. The wardrobe held a number of suits of good cloth and cut. Sharps methodically tried them on.

He chose a suit of dark blue worsted that, again, fit him tolerably, although the coat was loose in the shoulders.

By the time he was dressed, the lower limb of the sun was touching the horizon. He heard a gong sound deep within the house. A moment later, the lock turned again and the door opened. Baron Tötösy stood in the hall, smiling.

"It is so easy for a man to lose himself when he is a stranger here," he said. "Come, follow me. I will be your guide to supper."

Supper itself was indeed simple, a cold beet soup, meat and vegetables grilled *en brochette*, and a confection of chocolate, whipped cream, and brandy, all accompanied by an excellent claret as red as blood. The coachman served. When conversation flagged, Baron Tötösy introduced the subject of the morning's murders.

"They say," he began, "that those Turks were dispatched in an infamous fashion, involving a fireplace poker."

"Oh?" said Sharps. "The Commissioner said something to the effect of their throats being cut."

"No doubt, no doubt, lest they protest aloud at the outrage being performed upon them," the baron said. He looked at his sister. "What, are you not amused?"

"I hardly think this is suitable dinner-table conversation," she replied.

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Sharps turned the talk to lexicography, and Tötösy drew out his guest about his travels on the continent. Sharps's tales of scholarly vagabondage from Paris to Stamboul drew forth reminiscences in kind from Tötösy, and even Sophia smiled.

Soon, after port and cigars, Sharps said, "May I see the library now?"

"Of course."

The baron himself lifted the large silver candelabra from the table and led the way.

The library was vast, dark paneled and high arched, with shelves lining three sides, their topmost reaches accessible from balconies and by means of ladders. Leather chairs stood beside the hearth. Lamps glistened on the polished tables. Over the fireplace, deep-graven in the mantle stone, stood a motto in antique Romanian: *Within these volumes even death may die.*

"Here," said the baron. "Our work is laid out for us."

Paper and pens and bottles of ink adorned every table. Lead pencils and gummed labels stood between boxes of file cards.

"Shall we begin?"

"We shall."

Sharps pulled the nearest book from the nearest shelf, and wrote on a sheet of cream-laid paper: "*Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex.* Volume one, Louvain, 1599. Delrio (Martin Antoine). Quarto. Green tooled leather binding. 292 pages. Title page with ten woodcuts showing scenes from Exodus...."

Little chance, he thought, of the Grey Book's lost pages surfacing here, among these mostly conventional volumes.

Outside the leaded windows the moon rose. Time passed. A clock struck, then struck again. At last, near eleven, the baron stood from the table where he had been working, inscribing bibliographic information in a small, neat hand.

"Well begun is half done," he said. "May I offer you a brandy and see you to your room?"

Sharps raised the cut-crystal glass that the baron offered him to his lips. Beneath the burn of the brandy he tasted the bitter hint of laudanum.

Baron Tötösy was looking at him eagerly, his own glass in his hand.

"To life!" Sharps said, and drained the glass.

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"Life!" the baron echoed. "Now, to your room."

"Yes."

They went back through the halls and up the stairs. In an upper passageway lit by candles in wall sconces they met Sofia.

"*Freiin,*" Sharps said, taking her hand and raising it to his lips. As he did so, she bent forward and placing her mouth close to his ear whispered, "Save yourself. It is too late for me."

Sharps straightened and — speaking loudly enough for the baron to hear — said, "*Am Morgen.*"

They arrived at his room. The baron courteously held the door.

"Sleep well," he said. "Do not dream."

The door shut. The lock clicked. Sharps waited a moment, his ear to the door, hearing the sound of retreating footsteps. Then he pulled the chamber pot from beneath the bed and knelt before it. "When in Romania do as the Romanians," he said, and put his finger down his throat. He retched as quietly as he could until his stomach was quite empty.

"*Vomo, vomere, vomui, vomitus,*" he whispered, then stood and turned toward the door.

"Do not attempt to lock a man in if you have left the hinge pins on the same side of the wall," he muttered, and set to work.

Once in the hall, with the door propped back in an approximation of its former state, Sharps took off his shoes and tied their laces together, placing them around his neck. Then in stocking feet he advanced, staying next to the wall to minimize squeaks from the floorboards. He turned left and went down the stairs, retracing the steps that he had followed twice before.

Thus he proceeded toward the musicians' gallery that overlooked the dining room where he had eaten that evening. The light of the full moon cast a silver glow wherever it fell, making all the darker the shadows in which he lurked.

In the distance, to his right, he heard what could be a low chanting. As he drew nearer to the source of the voices — he recognized the language as being late Latin — a light appeared bobbing before him, as of a candle being carried in hand. He pressed himself back into the shadows beside a suit of armor, on the opposite side from the direction of the light. It moved, it approached, and before long, Sharps could see that the light belonged to

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Sofia, who was walking slowly down the hall, clad only in a shift and a dressing gown, and shielding the flame of the candle with her hand.

The candle flickered in a sudden breeze as she passed by his hiding place. She turned toward him, then gasped and stepped back.

"Fräulein," he said in a low tone.

"Herr Sharps!" she whispered. "You startled me. Why are you not asleep?"

"A misspent youth," he replied. "Unwise practices during my undergraduate days lent me a certain tolerance for opium. But tell me: Is Herr Tötösy actually your brother?"

Sofia gave a low laugh. "Not by birth, if that is your question. He is using you, just as he is using me."

She began to walk along the passage, away from the voices. At least two men, perhaps three, perhaps more, were chanting.

"How is he using you?"

"This place," and she gestured with her hand to take in the hall and the rooms, and the entire *burg*, "belongs to me, and to my family. I was raised here. Unless I accompany him he cannot enter these walls. He seeks something here, though what it is, I cannot tell. That is your purpose in his plans."

They arrived at a stairway. Sofia led the way down. The tapestries were black in the moonlight.

"What is my part?"

"Come to the library; I will show you."

They silently made their way through the darkened rooms, past hearths grown cold. In the library Sofia touched her candle to a lamp.

"There is a document, from my grandfather's time or before," she said, "that he desires to read. But he does not know the tongue. He believes that it points to great treasure. Here is what he plans: one day, whilst pretending to catalog the books," and here she pulled a book from the stack that the Baron had been working on, "he would open one and pretend to find there a sheet of parchment. 'Oh, look,' he would say. 'What do you make of this?'"

Here she pulled a sheet of parchment from the book and laid it on the table by the lamp. "Once you had read it to him, assuming you could, then your part here, and mine, would be at an end and he would dispose of us."

"How inhospitable."

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"Indeed so, Herr Sharps. I rely on you. I did not dare hope...until...."

Sharps was looking over the document. "Hmmm. Yes."

The parchment was quite old, the hand antique. The language appeared to be a rare form of Gothic. *Seek first in the crypt, there the tomb lies....* The words filled him with dismay.

"I will need to get back to town, to consult my books."

"There is a secret passage in the wine cellar," Sofia said. "We will escape."

"So we will," agreed Sharps. He took a moment to put back on the shoes he had earlier removed — once outside, silence would be less important than protection against hazards underfoot. Then Sofia caught up the lamp and led the way through the dining room to a set of stairs behind a door. They descended into musty gloom.

The wine cellar itself was as vast as any of the rooms above. Rack after rack of dusty bottles stood against the walls and in ranks down the center. Sofia walked toward the far wall.

Then came a sound on the stairs. Both Sharps and Sofia froze, hardly daring to breathe. Sharps reached out his hand and picked up a bottle of wine. The bottle was made of thick green glass, with a satisfying heft to it; like most of the others in its rack, it had been wrapped for protection at some point in a twist of vellum. Improvised weapon in hand, he stood beside the doorway where the stairway from above debouched into the wine cellar, and waited.

Sofia gestured to him to come; he shook his head "no."

Another soft footfall on the stairs, the gleam of a lamp descending. A man stepped through the doorway, a dark-lantern in his hand, his eyes fixed on Sofia.

Sharps hit him beside the ear with the bottle. He went down hard as the bottle shattered. Sharps snatched up the still-burning lantern and looked down. It was the coachman.

"Have you killed him?"

"I think...wait a moment, what's this?" Sharp's eyes fell on the vellum that had formerly enwrapped the broken bottle. The sheet had fallen away when he dropped the bottleneck to seize the coachman's lantern. Now it lay half-unfurled on the stone floor, revealing lines of Latin text in an early Renaissance hand.

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He thought little of it — scraps of old parchment turned up everywhere, from the bindings of incunabula to the seals on jars of jam, and most of the texts were mere commonplaces — but he scanned the page rapidly all the same. Then he picked it up from the floor and angled the lantern to look at it more closely.

"This is part of the *Liber Pallidus*," he said. "I recognize the opening lines. But the passage does not continue in the same fashion as the texts I know."

"Come quickly!" Sofia said. "He will wake up at any moment. We will be discovered!"

But Sharps was at the wine rack, pulling out another bottle wrapped in vellum. He unwrapped it. "Yes!" More of the unknown, intermixed with material from the later texts. He stuffed the sheet into his pocket, and reached for yet another vellum-wrapped bottle. "I was right! Aldus Manutius was working from flawed sources when he set the *Liber Pallidus* into type — the Regensburg Codex and the San Marco Manuscript are both incomplete! These are the pages that have been missing from the Grey Book since at least 1540!"

He put the lantern on the floor to allow himself to more rapidly take the bottles from the rack and stuff the vellum into the pockets of his coat. So rapt was he with securing those documents, only glancing at them to see what they were, not daring to take the time to read, that he scarcely paid attention when a large gray wolf came bounding down the stairs, or when it melted into mist.

But when it reformed in the shape of Báró Tötösy, Sharps turned toward him and said, "Ah, yes. I rather expected you."

"You should have gotten away when you could," Tötösy said, advancing.

Sharps pulled a penknife from his pocket and lunged forward, thrusting the penknife into the left side of Tötösy's chest.

The baron laughed. "Have you learned nothing from all your books in all your many languages?"

"Perhaps not," Sharps said. He stepped back and lunged again, this time burying the blade in the right side of Tötösy's chest. "But I did learn that *strigoi* have two hearts, so perhaps that might count for something."

The baron fell. Against the far wall, Sofia stood screaming.

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"Oh, for heaven's sake," Sharps said. "We have work to do. Could you carry the lights?"

After he had secured the last of the manuscript pages, he searched the coachman, finding a ring of keys in the man's waistcoat pocket. Then he pulled Tötösy's lifeless body up onto his shoulders and started up the stairs. Sofia followed him, carrying both the lamp and the lantern.

"Where's the closest door to the outside?" Sharps asked.

She pointed, wordlessly. Sharps nodded and went in that direction. Along the way he paused, shifted his load, and pulled a sword from a display of crossed swords and shield beside a dark fireplace. Then he resumed his course.

Soon they came to a door. Sharps lowered the baron's body to the ground, unlocked the door, and pushed it open. Then he grabbed the body by the ankles and pulled it out onto the grass and into a patch of moonlight.

He stood holding his borrowed sword loosely by the pommel, its point on the ground. "The *strigoi vir*," he said, "is a living sorcerer. After death, should the body be exposed to the direct light of the moon, it transforms into the *strigoi mort*, the undead or living dead, even more powerful and wicked."

The body twitched and moved, rolling first to its knees, then standing. Sharps struck off its head with the sword. The head rolled away and the body collapsed back onto the earth.

"Fortunately," he said, "it is simple to kill."

He turned to the woman and held out his hand. "Miss Sofia? If you would accompany me?"

She stepped forward, her features full of amazement. "How did you know — ?"

"Really," Sharps said, "did you think that I don't read the documents that I study?"

"No, I...."

In that moment, a dark-cloaked figure stepped out through the doorway from the interior of the building, a sword in his hand.

Sharps raised his own blade and came to the position of guard.

"Do you fence?" said the newcomer.

"Yes — I learned in my *Bruderschaft* in Heidelberg," Sharps said.

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Then he laughed. "But come, put up your sword, Herr Oberst Commissioner Haidekker. You are no longer in thrall to the *strigoi*."

"And you are no longer under arrest," Haidekker said, throwing back his hood. "My coach is at hand. Will you accompany me?"

"With the *Frèiin*," he said, and offered her his hand again.

The police commissioner's coach was nearby. The official took the reins while Sharps and the young lady took seats inside. They were away; the bright light of the full moon made the road clear as day. Sofia held Sharps's hand as she sat beside him.

"What was it that made you first suspect?" she asked.

"It was an accumulation of things," he replied. "But the primary one was that Tötösy had no real need of me for the purpose he gave. The library at the *burg* is almost entirely conventional — one might almost think that it had been purchased wholesale to fill out shelves left mostly empty by a previous owner. Cataloging it might be tedious work, but would require no great scholarly gifts to accomplish. And if the Baron were lying about that one great thing, how much more might he also be lying about? Then he gave me too much time alone in which to think. The rest followed."

"And what shall become of me?" Sofia asked. Her head rested on Sharps's shoulder. He felt her lips, cold on his neck. He pressed the cross he had made of wood from the clothespress, bound with cord from a shirt's laces, into her forehead until she stopped writhing and lay still.

"You? You'll die and stay dead, like that unfortunate Magyar *strigoi* you made and controlled," Sharps said. Then he rapped on the top of the coach. "Herr Haidekker," he said. "You can turn toward town now. This time you are truly free. And if you don't mind, I'll ride up there with you."

Dawn was breaking as they arrived in Bistrita. They drove directly to the police station, where Sharps accompanied Haidekker to his office.

"I knew that you weren't the criminal," Haidekker said. "When individuals well-known to be demon hunters are horribly killed, one seeks for the murderer among demons, not among casual tourists." He shook his head. "The Hasanakis will be missed. They did great work in their own land."

"I think I can offer some insight on how it was done," Sharps said. "The *strigoi vir*, Tötösy, took the form of a rat and so ran through the walls, entering their rooms. Once there, using tools that he found, a knife

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and the fireplace poker, he killed them, before they could identify and kill his mistress.

"Then he, or more likely she, learned that I was present. At first the pair of them considered whether I might be a threat; but then I conjecture that they saw instead an opportunity. They planned to use my knowledge of lost languages and old manuscripts to discover something about their own ancestry, and about where the founder of their line might be found, and how they might rouse him from an uneasy sleep."

"I daresay you are correct," Haidekker said, as he removed Sharps's passport from his safe and handed it to him. "If so, you may have saved us from a far greater plague than even the brothers Hasanaki could have imagined. Nevertheless, you will need to leave the country as soon as possible; these events will be hard enough to explain without having to account as well for your presence. I am sorry for your researches."

"My researches will soon be taking a new direction," Sharps said. His hand brushed his pocket, where the pages from the *Liber Pallidus* still rested. "It is no great tragedy that I cannot continue to Brasov."

"I am glad to hear it," said Haidekker. "One last thing, Herr Sharps: Never write or speak of what happened here tonight."

"May I die a howling madman if I do," Sharps said.

With that he collected his luggage and departed for the railway station. If he hurried, he would be in time to catch the morning train back to Vienna.

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Once again we Americans find ourselves in a Presidential election year and once again we find that some of our contributors are inspired by the niceties (and not-so-niceties) of political protocol during a campaign. Longtime readers might recall past political stories such as Robert Reed's "First Tuesday" and Dale Bailey's "Death and Suffrage" (and check our Website to see which one is reprinted there). Now Richard Bowes draws on his Boston background to spin a story that several of our in-house readers have deemed unforgettable (or maybe they simply said they couldn't get it out of their heads).

If Angels Fight

By Richard Bowes

1.

OUTSIDE THE WINDOW, THE blue water of the Atlantic danced in the sunlight of an early morning in October. They're short, quiet trains, the ones that roll through Connecticut just after dawn. I sipped bad tea, dozed off occasionally and awoke with a start.

Over the last forty years, I've ridden the northbound train from New York to Boston hundreds of times. I've done it alone, with friends and lovers, going home for the holidays, setting out on vacations, on my way to funerals.

That morning, I was with one who was once in some ways my best friend and certainly my oldest. Though we had rarely met in decades, it seemed that a connection endured. Our mission was vital and we rode the train by default: a terrorist threat had closed traffic at Logan Airport in Boston the night before.

I'd left messages canceling an appointment, letting the guy I was

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going out with know I'd be out of town briefly for a family crisis. No need to say it was another, more fascinating, family disrupting my life, not mine.

The old friend caught my discomfort at what we were doing and was amused.

A bit of Shakespeare occurred to me when I thought of him:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king

He was quiet for a while after hearing those lines. It was getting toward twenty-four hours since I'd slept. I must have dozed because suddenly I was in a dark place with two tiny slits of light high above. I found hand and foot holds and crawled up the interior wall of a stone tower. As I got to the slits of light, a voice said, "New Haven. This stop New Haven."

2.

Carol Bannon had called me less than two weeks before. "I'm going to be down in New York the day after tomorrow," she said. "I wondered if we could get together." I took this to mean that she and her family wanted to get some kind of fix on the present location and current state of her eldest brother, my old friend Mark.

Over the years when this had happened it was Marie Bannon, Mark and Carol's mother, who contacted me. Those times I'd discovered channels through which she could reach her straying son. This time, I didn't make any inquiries before meeting Carol, but I did check to see if certain parties still had the same phone numbers and habits that I remembered.

Thinking about Marky Bannon, I too wondered where he was. He's always somewhere on my mind. When I see a photo of some great event, a reception, or celebrity trial, a concert or inauguration — I scan the faces wondering if he's present.

I'm retired these days, with time to spend. But over the years, keeping tabs on the Bannons was an easy minor hobby. The mother is still alive

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though not very active now. The father was a longtime Speaker of the Massachusetts House and a candidate for governor who died some years back. An intersection in Dorchester and an entrance to the Boston Harbor tunnel are still named for him.

Carol, the eldest daughter, got elected to the City Council at the age of twenty-eight. Fourteen years later she gave up a safe U.S. House seat to run the Commerce Department for Clinton. Later she served on the 9/11 commission and is a perennial cable TV talking head. She's married to Jerry Simone who has a stake in Google. Her brother Joe is a leading campaign consultant in D.C. Keeping up the idealistic end of things, her little sister Eileen is a member of Doctors Without Borders. My old friend Mark is the tragic secret without which no Irish family would be complete.

Carol asked me to meet her for tea uptown in the Astor Court of the St. Regis Hotel. I got there a moment after four. The Astor Court has a blinding array of starched white tablecloths and gold chandeliers under a ceiling mural of soft, floating clouds.

Maybe her choice of meeting places was intentionally campy. Or maybe because I don't drink anymore she had hit upon this as an amusing spot to bring me.

Carol and I always got along. Even aged ten and eleven I was different enough from the other boys that I was nice to my friends' little sisters.

Carol has kept her hair chestnut but allowed herself fine gray wings. Her skin and teeth are terrific. The Bannons were what was called dark Irish when we were growing up in Boston in the 1950s. That meant they weren't so white that they automatically burst into flames on their first afternoon at the beach.

They're a handsome family. The mother is still beautiful in her eighties. Marie Bannon had been on the stage a bit before she married. She had that light and charm, that ability to convince you that her smile was for you alone that led young men and old to drop everything and do her bidding.

Mike Bannon, the father, had been a union organizer before he went nights to law school, then got into politics. He had rugged good looks, blue eyes that would look right into you, and a fine smile that he could turn on and off and didn't often waste on kids.

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"When the mood's upon him, he can charm a dog off a meat wagon," I remember a friend of my father's remarking. It was a time and place where politicians and race horses alike were scrutinized and handicapped.

The Bannon children had inherited the parents' looks and, in the way of politicians' kids, were socially poised. Except for Mark, who could look lost and confused one minute, oddly intense the next, with eyes suddenly just like his father's.

Carol rose to kiss me as I approached the table. It seemed kind of like a Philip Marlowe moment: I imagined myself as a private eye, tough and amused, called in by the rich dame for help in a personal matter.

When I first knew Carol Bannon, she wore pigtails and cried because her big brother wouldn't take her along when we went to the playground. Recently there's been speculation everywhere that a distinguished Massachusetts senator is about to retire before his term ends. Carol Bannon is the odds-on favorite to be appointed to succeed him.

Then, once she's in the Senate, given that it's the Democratic Party we're talking about, who's to say they won't go crazy again and run one more Bay State politician for President in the wild hope that they've got another JFK?

Carol said, "My mother asked me to remember her to you." I asked Carol to give her mother my compliments. Then we each said how good the other looked and made light talk about the choices of teas and the drop-dead faux Englishness of the place. We reminisced about Boston and the old neighborhood.

"Remember how everyone called that big overgrown vacant lot, 'Fitzie's'?" I asked. The nickname had come from its being the site where the Fitzgerald mansion, the home of 'Honey Fitz,' the old mayor of Boston, once stood. His daughter, Rose, was mother to the Kennedy brothers.

"There was a marble floor in the middle of the trash and weeds," I said, "And everybody was sure the place was haunted.

"The whole neighborhood was haunted," she said. "There was that little old couple who lived down Melville Avenue from us. They knew my parents. He was this gossipy elf. He had held office back in the old days and everyone called him, 'The Hon Hen,' short for 'the Honorable Henry.' She was a daughter of Honey Fitz. They were aunt and uncle of the Kennedys."

Melville Avenue was and is a street where the houses are set back on

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lawns and the garages are converted horse barns. When we were young, doctors and prosperous lawyers lived there along with prominent saloon owners and politicians like Michael Bannon and his family.

Suddenly at our table in the Astor Court, the pots and plates, the Lapsang and scones, the marmalade, the clotted cream and salmon finger sandwiches appeared. We were silent for a little while and I thought about how politics had seemed a common occupation for kids' parents in Irish Boston. Politicians' houses tended to be big and semi-public with much coming and going and loud talk.

Life at the Bannons' was much more exciting than at my house. Mark had his own room and didn't have to share with his little brother. He had a ten-year-old's luxuries: electronic football, enough soldiers to fight Gettysburg if you didn't mind that the Confederates were mostly Indians, and not one but two electric train engines, which made wrecks a positive pleasure. Mark's eyes would come alive when the cars flew off the tracks in a rainbow of sparks.

"What are you smiling at?" Carol asked.

And I cut to the chase and said, "Your brother. I remember the way he liked to leave his room. That tree branch right outside his window: he could reach out, grab hold of it, scramble hand over hand to the trunk."

I remembered how the branches swayed and sighed and how scared I was every time I had to follow him.

"In high school," Carol said, "at night he'd sneak out when he was supposed to be in bed and scramble back inside much later. I knew and our mother, but no one else. One night the bough broke as he tried to get back in the window. He fell all the way to the ground, smashing through more branches on the way.

"My father was down in the study plotting malfeasance with Governor Furcolo. They and everyone else came out to see what had happened. We found Mark lying on the ground laughing like a lunatic. He had a fractured arm and a few scratches. Even I wondered if he'd fallen on his head."

For a moment I watched for some sign that she knew I'd been right behind her brother when he fell. I'd gotten down the tree fast and faded into the night when I saw lights come on inside the house. It had been a long, scary night and before he laughed, Mark had started to sob.

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Now that we were talking about her brother, Carol was able to say, almost casually, "My mother has her good days and her bad days. But for thirty years she's hinted to me that she had a kind of contact with him. I didn't tell her that wasn't possible because it obviously meant a lot to her."

She was maintaining a safe zone, preserving her need not to know. I frowned and fiddled with a sliver of cucumber on buttered brown bread.

Carol put on a full court press, "Mom wants to see Mark again and she thinks it needs to be soon. She told me you knew people and could arrange things. It would make her so happy if you could do whatever that was again."

I too kept my distance. "I ran some errands for your mother a couple of times that seemed to satisfy her. The last time was fourteen years ago and at my age I'm not sure I can even remember what I did."

Carol gave a rueful little smile, "You were my favorite of all my brother's friends. You'd talk to me about my dollhouse. It took me years to figure out why that was. When I was nine and ten years old I used to imagine you taking me out on dates."

She reached across the table and touched my wrist. "If there's any truth to any of what Mom says, I could use Mark's help too. You follow the news.

"I'm not going to tell you the current administration wrecked the world all by themselves or that if we get back in it will be the second coming of Franklin Roosevelt and Abe Lincoln all rolled into one.

"I am telling you I think this is end game. We either pull ourselves together in the next couple of years or we become Disney World."

I didn't tell her I thought we had already pretty much reached the stage of the U.S. as theme park.

"It's not possible that Mark's alive," she said evenly. "But his family needs him. None of us inherited our father's gut instincts, his political animal side. It may be a mother's fantasy, but ours says Mark did."

I didn't wonder aloud if the one who had been Marky Bannon still existed in any manifestation we'd recognize.

Then Carol handed me a very beautiful check from a consulting firm her husband owned. I told her I'd do whatever I could. Someone had said about Carol, "She's very smart and she knows all the rules of

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the game. But I'm not sure the game these days has anything to do with the rules."

3.

AFTER OUR little tea, I thought about the old Irish-American city of my childhood and how ridiculous it was for Carol Bannon to claim no knowledge of Mark Bannon. It reminded me of the famous Bolger brothers of South Boston.

You remember them: William Bolger was first the President of the State Senate and then the President of the University of Massachusetts. Whitey Bolger was head of the Irish mob, a murderer and an FBI informant gone bad. Whitey was on the lam for years. Bill always claimed, even under oath, that he never had any contact with his brother.

That had always seemed preposterous to me. The Bolgers' mother was alive. And a proper Irish mother will always know what each of her children is doing no matter how they hide. And she'll bombard the others with that information no matter how much they don't want to know. I couldn't imagine Mrs. Bannon not doing that.

What kept the media away from the story was that Mark had — in all the normal uses of the terms — died, been waked and memorialized some thirty-five years ago.

I remembered how in the Bannon family the father adored Carol and her sister Eileen. He was even a tiny bit in awe of little Joe who at the age of six already knew the name and political party of the governor of each state in the union. But Michael Bannon could look very tired when his eyes fell on Mark.

The ways of Irish fathers with their sons were mysterious and often distant. Mark was his mother's favorite. But he was, I heard it whispered, dull normal, a step above retarded.

I remembered the way the Bannons' big house could be full of people I didn't know and how all the phones — the Bannons were the only family I knew with more than one phone in their house — could be ringing at once.

Mike Bannon had a study on the first floor. One time when Mark and

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I went past, I heard him in there saying, "We got the quorum. Now who's handling the seconding speech?" We went up to Mark's room and found two guys there. One sat on the bed with a portable typewriter on his lap, pecking away. The other stood by the window and said, "...real estate tax that's fair for all."

"For everybody," said the guy with the typewriter, "Sounds better." Then they noticed we were there and gave us a couple of bucks to go away.

Another time, Mark and I came back from the playground to find his father out on the front porch talking to the press who stood on the front lawn. This, I think, was when he was elected Speaker of the Lower House of the Great and General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, as the state legislature was called.

It was for moments like these that Speaker Bannon had been created. He smiled and photographers' flashes went off. Then he glanced in his son's direction, the penetrating eyes dimmed, the smile faded. Remembering this, I wondered what he saw.

After it was over, when his father and the press had departed, Mark went right on staring intently at the spot where it had happened. I remember thinking that he looked kind of like his father at that moment.

One afternoon around then the two of us sat on the rug in the TV room and watched a movie about mountain climbers scaling the Himalayas. Tiny black and white figures clung to ropes, made their way single file across glaciers, huddled in shallow crevices as high winds blew past.

It wasn't long afterward that Mark, suddenly intense, led me and a couple of other kids along a six-inch ledge that ran around the courthouse in Codman Square.

The ledge was a couple of feet off the ground at the front of the building. We sidled along, stumbling once in a while, looking in the windows at the courtroom where a trial was in session. We turned the corner and edged our way along the side of the building. Here we faced the judge behind his raised desk. At first he didn't notice. Then Mark smiled and waved.

The judge summoned a bailiff, pointed to us. Mark sidled faster and we followed him around to the back of the building. At the rear of the courthouse was a sunken driveway that led to a garage. The ledge was a good sixteen feet above the cement. My hands began to sweat but I was smart enough not to look down.

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The bailiff appeared, told us to halt and go back. The last kid in line, eight years old where the rest of us were ten, froze where he was and started to cry.

Suddenly the summer sunshine went gray and I was inching my way along an icy ledge hundreds of feet up a sheer cliff.

After a moment that vision was gone. Cops showed up, parked their car right under us to cut the distance we might fall. A crowd, mostly kids, gathered to watch the fire department bring us down a ladder. When we were down, I turned to Mark and saw that his concentration had faded.

"My guardian angel brought us out here," he whispered.

The consequences were not severe. Mark was a privileged character and that extended to his confederates. When the cops drove us up to his house, Mrs. Bannon came out and invited us all inside. Soon the kitchen was full of cops drinking spiked coffee like it was St. Patrick's Day and our mothers all came by to pick us up and laugh about the incident with Mrs. Bannon.

Late that same summer, I think, an afternoon almost at the end of vacation, the two of us turned onto Melville Avenue and saw Cadillacs double-parked in front of the Hon Hen's house. A movie camera was set up on the lawn. A photographer stood on the porch. We hurried down the street.

As we got there, the front door flew open and several guys came out laughing. The cameraman started to film, the photographer snapped pictures. Young Senator Kennedy was on the porch. He turned back to kiss his aunt and shake hands with his uncle.

He was thin with reddish brown hair and didn't seem entirely adult. He winked as he walked past us and the cameras clicked away. A man in a suit got out of a car and opened the door, the young senator said, "Okay, that's done."

As they drove off, the Hon Hen waved us up onto the porch, brought out dishes of ice cream. It was his wife's birthday and their nephew had paid his respects.

A couple of weeks later, after school started, a story with plenty of pictures appeared in the magazine section of the *Globe*: a day in the life of Senator Kennedy. Mark and I were in the one of him leaving his aunt's birthday. Our nun, Sister Mary Claire, put the picture up on the bulletin board.

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The rest of the nuns came by to see. The other kids resented us for a few days. The Cullen brothers, a mean and sullen pair, motherless and raised by a drunken father, hated us for ever after.

I saw the picture again a few years ago. Kennedy's wearing a full campaign smile, I'm looking at the great man, open mouthed. Mark stares at the camera so intently that he seems ready to jump right off the page.

4.

THE FIRST STOP on my search for Mark Bannon's current whereabouts was right in my neighborhood. It's been said about Greenwich Village that here time is all twisted out of shape like an abstract metal sculpture: past, present, and future intertwine.

Looking for that mix, the first place I went was Fiddler's Green way east on Bleecker Street. Springsteen sang at Fiddler's and Madonna waited tables before she became Madonna. By night it's a tourist landmark and a student magnet but during the day it's a little dive for office workers playing hooky and old village types in search of somewhere dark and quiet.

As I'd hoped, "Daddy Frank" Parnelli, with eyes like a drunken hawk's and sparse white hair cropped like a drill sergeant's, sipped a beer in his usual spot at the end of the bar. Once the legend was that he was where you went when you wanted yesterday's mistake erased or needed more than just a hunch about tomorrow's market.

Whether any of that was ever true, now none of it is. The only thing he knows these days is his own story and parts of that he can't tell to most people. I was an exception.

We hadn't talked in a couple of years but when he saw me he grimaced and asked, "Now what?" like I pestered him every day.

"Seemed like you might be here and I thought I'd stop by and say hello."

"Real kind of you to remember an old sadist."

I'm not that much younger than he is but over the years, I've learned a thing or two about topping from Daddy Frank. Like never giving a bottom an even break. I ordered a club soda and pointed for the bartender to fill Daddy Frank's empty shot glass with whatever rye he'd been drinking.

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Daddy stared at it like he was disgusted then took a sip and another. He looked out the window. Across the street, a taxi let out an enormously fat woman with a tiny dog. Right in front of Fiddler's a crowd of smiling Japanese tourists snapped pictures of each other.

A bearded computer student sat about halfway down the bar from us with a gin and tonic and read what looked like a thousand-page book. A middle-aged man and his wife studied the signed photos on the walls while quietly singing scraps of songs to each other.

Turning back to me with what might once have been an enigmatic smile, Daddy Frank said, "You're looking for Mark Bannon."

"Yes."

"I have no fucking idea where he is," he said. "Never knew him before he appeared in my life. Never saw him again when he was through with me."

I waited, knowing this was going to take a while. When he started talking, the story wasn't one that I knew.

"Years ago, in sixty-nine, maybe seventy, it's like, two in the afternoon on Saturday, a few weeks before Christmas. I'm in a bar way west on Fourteenth Street near the meat-packing district. McNally's maybe or the Emerald Gardens, one of them they used to have over there that all looked alike. They had this bartender with one arm, I remember. He'd lost the other one on the docks."

"Making mixed drinks must have been tough," I said.

"Anyone asked for one, he came at them with a baseball bat. Anyway, the time I'm telling you about, I'd earned some money that morning bringing discipline to someone who hadn't been brought up right. I was living with a bitch in Murray Hill. But she had money and I saw no reason to share.

"I'm sitting there and this guy comes in wearing an overcoat with the collar pulled up. He's younger than me but he looks all washed out like he's been on a long complicated bender. No one I recognized, but people there kind of knew him."

I understood what was being described and memory supplied a face for the stranger.

"He sits down next to me. Has this piece he wants to unload, a cheap thirty-two. It has three bullets in it. He wants ten bucks. Needs the money

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to get home to his family. I look down and see I still have five bucks left."

I said, "A less stand-up guy might have wondered what happened to the other three bullets."

"I saw it as an opportunity. As I look back I see, maybe, it was a test. I offer the five and the stranger sells me the piece. So now I have a gun and no money. All of a sudden the stranger comes alive, smiles at me, and I feel a lot different. With a purpose, you know?

"With the buzz I had, I didn't even wonder why this was. All I knew was I needed to put the piece to use. That was when I thought of Klein's. The place I was staying was over on the East Side and it was on my way home. You remember Klein's Department Store?"

"Sure, on Union Square. 'Klein's on the Square' was the motto and they had a big neon sign of a right angle ruler out front."

"Great fucking bargains. Back when I was six and my mother wanted to dress me like a little asshole, that's where she could do it cheap. As a kid I worked there as a stock boy. I knew they kept all the receipts, whatever they took in, up on the top floor and that they closed at six on Saturdays."

As he talked, I remembered the blowsy old Union Square, saw the tacky Christmas lights, the crowds of women toting shopping bags and young Frank Parnelli cutting his way through them on his way to Klein's.

"It's so simple I do it without thinking. I go up to the top floor like I have some kind of business. It's an old-fashioned store way back when people used cash. Security is one old guy wearing glasses. I go in the refund line and when I get up to the counter, I pull out the gun. The refunds ladies all soil their panties

"I clean the place out. Thousands of bucks in a shopping bag and I didn't even have to go out of my way. I run down the stairs and nobody stops me. It's dark outside and I blend in with the crowd. As I walk down Fourteenth, the guy from the bar who sold me the gun is walking beside me.

"Before he looked beat. Now it's like the life has been sucked out of him and he's the living dead. But you know what? I have a locker at Grammercy Gym near Third Ave. I go in there so I can change from my leathers into a warm-up jacket and a baseball cap. Like it's the most natural thing, I give the guy a bunch of bills. He goes off to his family. I don't ever see him again.

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"I'm still drunk and amazed. That night I'm on a plane. Next day I'm in L.A. Both of those things for the first time. After that I'm not in this world half the time. Not this world like I thought it was anyway. And somewhere in those first days, I realized I wasn't alone inside my own head. A certain Mark Bannon was in there too."

I looked down the bar. The student was drinking his gin, turning his pages. The couple had stopped singing and were sitting near the window. The bartender was on his cell phone. I signaled and he refilled Frank's glass.

"It was a wild ride for a few years," Daddy Frank said, "We hitched up with Red Ruth who ran us both ragged. She got us into politics in the Caribbean: Honduras, Nicaragua, stuff I still can't talk about, Ruth and me and Bannon.

"Then she got tired of us, I got tired of having Mark Bannon on the brain and he got tired of me being me. It happens."

He leaned his elbow on the bar and had one hand over his eyes. "What is it? His mother looking for him again? I met her that first time when she had you find him. She's a great lady."

"Something like that," I said. "Anyone else ask you about Mark Bannon recently?"

"A couple of weeks ago someone came around asking questions. He said he has like a news show on the computer. Paul Revere is his name? Something like that. He came on like he knew something. But a lot smarter guys than him have tried to mix it up with me."

"No one else has asked?"

He shook his head.

"Anything you want me to tell Marky if I should see him?"

Without taking his hand away from his eyes, Daddy Frank raised the other, brought the glass to his lips, and drained it. "Tell him it's been thirty years and more and I was glad when he left but I've been nothing but a bag of muscles and bones ever since."

5.

As evening falls in the South Village, the barkers come out. On opposite corners of the cross streets they stand with their spiels and handbills.

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"Come hear the brightest song writers in New York," said an angry young man, handing me a flyer.

A woman with snakes and flowers running up and down her arms and legs insisted, "You have just hit the tattoo jackpot!"

"Sir, you look as if you could use a good...laugh," said a small African-American queen outside a comedy club.

I noticed people giving the little sidelong glances that New Yorkers use when they spot a celebrity. But when I looked, the person was no one I recognized. That happens to me a lot these days.

Thinking about Mark Bannon and Frank Parnelli, I wondered if he just saw Frank as a vehicle with a tougher body and a better set of reflexes than his own? Did he look back with fondness when they parted company? Was it the kind of nostalgia you might have for a favorite horse or your first great car?

It was my luck to have known Mark when he was younger and his "guardian angel" was less skilled than it became. One Saturday when we were fourteen or so, going to different high schools and drifting apart, he and I were in a hockey free-for-all down on the Neponset River.

It was one of those silver and black winter Saturday afternoons when nothing was planned. A pack of kids from our neighborhood was looking for ice to play on. Nobody was ever supposed to swim or skate on that water so that's where a dozen of us headed.

We grabbed a stretch of open ice a mile or so from where the Neponset opens onto the Nantasket Roads, the stretch of water that connects Boston Harbor to the Atlantic Ocean. Our game involved shoving a battered puck around and plenty of body checks. Mark was on my team but seemed disconnected like he was most of the time.

The ice was thick out in the middle of the river but old and scarred and rutted by skates and tides. Along the shore where it was thin, the ice had been broken up at some points.

Once I looked around and saw that some kids eight or nine years old were out on the ice in their shoes jumping up and down, smashing through it and jumping away laughing when they did. There was a whir of skates behind me and I got knocked flat.

I was the smallest guy my age in the game. Ice chips went up the legs of my jeans and burned my skin. When I got my feet under me again, the

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little kids were yelling. One of them was in deep water holding onto the ice which kept breaking as he grabbed it.

Our game stopped and everyone stood staring. Then Mark came alive. He started forward and beckoned me, one of the few times he'd noticed me that afternoon. As I followed him, I thought I heard the words "Chain-Of-Life." It was a rescue maneuver that, maybe, boy scouts practiced but I'd never seen done.

Without willing it, I suddenly threw myself flat and was on my stomach on the ice. Mark was down on the ice behind me and had hold of my ankles. He yelled at the other guys for two of them to grab his ankles and four guys to grab theirs. I was the point of a pyramid.

Somehow I grabbed a hockey stick in my gloved hands. My body slithered forward on the ice and my arms held the stick out toward the little kid. Someone else was moving my body.

The ice here was thin. There was water on top of it. The kid grabbed the stick. I felt the ice moving under me, hands pulled my legs.

I gripped the stick. At first the kid split the ice as I pulled him along. I wanted to let go and get away before the splitting ice engulfed me too.

But I couldn't. I had no control over my hands. Then the little kid reached firm ice. Mark pulled my legs and I pulled the kid. His stomach bounced up onto the ice and then his legs. Other guys grabbed my end of the stick, pulled the kid past me.

I stood and Mark was standing also. The little boy was being led away, soaked and crying, water sloshing in his boots. Suddenly I felt the cold — the ice inside my pants and up the sleeves of my sweater — and realized what I'd done.

Mark Bannon held me up, pounded my back. "We did it! You and me!" he said. His eyes were alive and he looked like he was possessed. "I felt how scared you were when the ice started to break." And I knew this was Mark's angel talking.

The other guys clustered around us yelling about what we'd done. I looked up at the gray sky, at a freighter in the distance sailing up the Roads toward Boston Harbor. It was all black and white like television and my legs buckled under me.

Shortly afterward as evening closed in, the cops appeared and ordered

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everybody off the ice. That night, a little feverish, I dreamed and cried out in my sleep about ice and TV.

No adult knew what had happened but every kid did. Monday at school, ones who never spoke to me asked about it. I told them even though it felt like it had happened to someone else. And that feeling, I think, was what the memory of his years with Mark Bannon must have been like for Daddy Frank.

6.

AS SOON AS Frank Parnelli started talking about Paul Revere, I knew who he meant and wasn't surprised. I called Desmond Eliot and he wasn't surprised to hear from me either. Back when I first knew Des Eliot he and Carol Bannon went to Amherst and were dating each other. Now he operates the political blog, *Midnight Ride: Spreading the Alarm*.

A few days later, I sat facing Eliot in his home office in suburban Maryland. I guess he could work in his pajamas if he wanted to. But, in fact, he was dressed and shaved and ready to ride.

He was listening to someone on the phone and typing on a keyboard in his lap. Behind him were a computer and a TV with the sound turned off. The screen showed a runway in Jordan where the smoking ruins of a passenger plane were still being hosed down with chemicals. Then a Republican senator with presidential ambitions looked very serious as he spoke to reporters in Washington.

A brisk Asian woman, who had introduced herself as June, came into the office, collected the outgoing mail, and departed. A fax hummed in the corner. Outside, it was a sunny day and the trees had just begun to turn.

"Yes, I saw the dustup at the press conference this morning," he said into the phone. "The White House, basically, is claiming the Democrats planted a spy in the Republican National Committee. If I thought anyone on the DNC had the brains and chutzpah to do that I'd be cheering."

At that moment Des was a relatively happy man. *Midnight Ride* is, as he puts it, "A tool of the disloyal opposition," and right now things are going relatively badly for the administration.

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He hung up and told me, "Lately every day is a feast. This must be how the right wing felt when Clinton was up to his ass in blue dresses and cigars." As he spoke he typed on a keyboard, probably the very words he was uttering.

He stopped typing, put his feet up on a coffee table, and looked out over his half-frame glasses. His contacts with the Bannons go way back. It bothers him that mine go back further.

"You come all the way down here to ask me about Mark Bannon," he said. "My guess is it's not for some personal memoir like you're telling me. I think the family is looking for him and thinks I may have spotted him like I did with Svetlanov."

I shook my head like I didn't understand.

"Surely you remember. It was twenty years ago. No, a bit more. Deep in the Reagan years. Glasnost and Perestroika weren't even rumors. The Soviet Union was the Evil Empire. I was in Washington, writing for *The Nation,* consulting at a couple of think tanks, going out with Lucia, an Italian sculptress. Later on I was married to her for about six months.

"There was a Goya show at the Corcoran that Lucia wanted to see. We'd just come out of one of the galleries and there was this guy I was sure I'd never seen before, tall, prematurely gray.

"There was something very familiar about him. Not his looks, but something. When he'd talk to the woman he was with, whatever I thought I'd recognized didn't show. Then he looked my way and it was there again. As I tried to place him, he seemed like he was trying to remember me.

"Then I realized it was his eyes. At moments they had the same uncanny look that Mark Bannon's could get when I first knew him. Of course by then Mark had been dead for about thirteen years.

"Lucia knew who this was: a Russian art dealer named Georgi Svetlanov, the subject of rumors and legends. Each person I asked about him had a different story: he was a smuggler, a Soviet agent, a forger, a freedom fighter."

Eliot said, "It stuck with me enough that I mentioned it the next time I talked to Carol. She was planning a run for congress and I was helping. Carol didn't seem that interested.

"She must have written the name down, though. I kept watch on Svetlanov. Even aside from the Bannon connection he was interesting.

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Mrs. Bannon must have thought so too. He visited her a few times that I know of."

Marie Bannon had gotten in touch with me and mentioned this Russian man someone had told her about. She had the name and I did some research, found out his itinerary. At a major opening at the Shifrazi Gallery in Soho, I walked up to a big steely-haired man who seemingly had nothing familiar about him at all.

"Mark Bannon," I said quietly but distinctly.

At first the only reaction was Svetlanov looking at me like I was a bug. He sneered and began to turn away. Then he turned back and the angel moved behind his eyes. He looked at me hard, trying to place me.

I handed him my card. "Mark Bannon, your mother's looking for you," I said. "That's her number on the back." Suddenly eyes that were very familiar looked right into mine.

Des told me, "I saw Svetlanov after that in the flesh and on TV. He was in the background at Riga with Reagan and Gorbachev. I did quite a bit of research and discovered Frank Parnelli among other things. My guess is that Mark Bannon's...spirit or subconscious or whatever it is — was elsewhere by nineteen-ninety-two when Svetlanov died in an auto accident. Was I right?"

In some ways I sympathized with Eliot. I'd wondered about that too. And lying is bad. You get tripped by a lie more often than by the truth.

But I looked him in the face and said, "Mark wasn't signaling anybody from deep inside the skull of some Russian, my friend. You were at the wake, the funeral, the burial. Only those without a drop of Celtic blood believe there's any magic in the Irish."

He said, "The first time I noticed you was at that memorial service. Everyone else stood up and tiptoed around the mystery and disaster that had been his life. Then it was your turn and you quoted Shakespeare. Said he was a ruined king. You knew he wasn't really dead."

"Des, it was 1971. Joplin, Hendrix. Everyone was dying young. I was stoned, I was an aspiring theater person and very full of myself. I'd intended to recite Dylan Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle' but another drunken Mick beat me to that.

"So I reared back and gave them *Richard the Second*, which I'd had to learn in college. Great stuff:

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'Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord'

"As I remember," I said, "the contingent of nuns who taught Mark and me in school was seated down front. When I reached the lines:

...if angels fight,
Weak men must fall...

"They looked very pleased about the angels fighting. Booze and bravura is all it was," I said.

Partly that was true. I'd always loved the speech, maybe because King Richard and I share a name. But also it seemed so right for Mark. In the play, a king about to lose his life and all he owns on Earth invokes royal myth as his last hope.

"When I was dating Carol I heard the legends," Des told me. "She and her sister talked about how the family had gotten him into some country club school in New Jersey. He was expelled in his third week for turning the whole place on and staging an orgy that got the college president fired.

"They said how he'd disappear for weeks and Carol swore that once when he came stumbling home, he'd mumbled to her months before it happened that King and Bobby Kennedy were going to be shot.

"Finally, I was at the Bannons with Carol when the prodigal returned and it was a disappointment. He seemed mildly retarded, a burnout at age twenty-five. I didn't even think he was aware I existed.

"I was wrong about that. Mark didn't have a license or a car anymore. The second or third day he was back, Carol was busy. I was sitting on the sun porch, reading. He came out, smiled this sudden, magnetic smile just like his old man's and asked if that was my Ford two-door at the end of the driveway.

"Without his even asking I found myself giving him a lift. A few days later I woke up at a commune in the Green Mountains in New Hampshire with no clear idea of how I'd gotten there. Mark was gone and all the communards could tell me was, 'He enters and leaves as he wishes.'

"When I got back to Boston, Carol was pissed. We made up but in a lot of ways it was never the same. Not even a year or two later when Mike Bannon ran for governor and I worked my ass off on the campaign.

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"Mark was back home all the time then, drinking, taking drugs, distracting the family, especially his father, at a critical time. His eyes were empty and no matter how long everyone waited, they stayed that way. After the election he died, maybe as a suicide. But over the years I've come to think that didn't end the story."

It crossed my mind that Eliot knew too much. I said, "You saw them lower him into the ground."

"It's Carol who's looking this time, isn't it?" he asked. "She's almost there as a national candidate. Just a little too straight and narrow. Something extra needs to go in the mix. Please tell me that's going to happen."

A guy in his fifties looking for a miracle is a sad sight. One also sporting a college kid's crush is sadder still.

"Just to humor you, I'll say you're right," I told him. "What would you tell me my next step should be?"

The smile came off his face. "I have no leads," he said. "No source who would talk to me knows anything."

"But some wouldn't talk to you," I said.

"The only one who matters won't. She refuses to acknowledge my existence. It's time you went to see Ruth Vega."

7.

I WAS PRESENT on the night the angel really flew. It was in the summer of '59 when they bulldozed the big overgrown lot where the Fitzgerald mansion had once stood. Honey Fitz's place had burned down just twenty years before. But to kids my age, "Fitzie's" was legendary ground, a piece of untamed wilderness that had existed since time out of mind.

I was finishing my sophomore year in high school when they cleared the land. The big old trees that must have stood on the front lawn, the overgrown apple orchard in the back were chopped down and their stumps dug up.

The scraggly new trees, the bushes where we hid smeared in war paint on endless summer afternoons waiting for hapless smaller kids to pass by and get massacred, the half flight of stone stairs that ended in

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midair, the marble floor with moss growing through the cracks, all disappeared.

In their place a half-dozen cellars were dug and houses were built. We lost the wild playground but we'd already outgrown it. For that one summer we had half-finished houses to hide out in.

Marky and I got sent to different high schools outside the neighborhood and had drifted apart. Neither of us did well academically and we both ended up in the same summer school. So we did hang out one more time. Nights especially we sat with a few guys our age on unfinished wood floors with stolen beer and cigarettes and talked very large about what we'd seen and done out in the wide world.

That's what four of us were up to in a raw wood living room by the light of the moon and distant street lamps. Suddenly a flashlight shone in our faces and someone yelled, "Hands over your heads. Up against the wall."

For a moment, I thought it was the cops and knew they'd back off once they found out Marky was among us. In fact it was much worse: the Cullen brothers and a couple of their friends were there. In the dim light I saw a switchblade.

We were foul-mouthed little twerps with delusions of delinquency. These were the real thing: psycho boys raised by psycho parents. A kid named Johnny Kilty was the one of us nearest the door. Teddy — the younger, bigger, more rabid Cullen brother — pulled Johnny's T-shirt over his head, punched him twice in the stomach, and emptied his pockets.

Larry, the older, smarter, scarier Cullen, had the knife and was staring right at Marky. "Hey, look who we got!" he said in his toneless voice. "Hands on your head, faggot. This will be fucking hilarious."

Time paused as Mark Bannon stared back slack-jawed. Then his eyes lit up and he smiled like he saw something amazing.

As that happened, my shirt got pulled over my head. My watch was taken off my wrist. Then I heard Larry Cullen say without inflection, "This is no good. Give them their stuff back. We're leaving."

The ones who held me let go; I pulled my T-shirt back on.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Teddy asked.

"I gotta hurt you before you hear me?" Larry asked in dead tones. "Move before I kick your ass."

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They were gone as suddenly as they appeared, though I could hear Teddy protesting as they went through the construction site and down the street. "Have you gone bird shit, stupid?" he asked. I didn't hear Larry's reply.

We gathered our possessions. The other guys suddenly wanted very badly to be home with their parents. Only I understood that Mark had saved us. When I looked, he was staring vacantly. He followed us out of the house and onto the sidewalk.

"I need to go home," he whispered to me like a little kid who's lost. "My angel's gone," he said.

It was short of midnight though well past my curfew when I walked Marky home. Outside of noise and light from the bars in Codman Square, the streets were quiet and traffic was sparse. I tried to talk but Marky shook his head. His shoes seemed to drag on the pavement. He was a lot bigger than me but I was leading him.

Lights were on at his place when we got there and cars were parked in the driveway. "I need to go in the window," he mumbled and we went around back. He slipped as he started to climb the tree and it seemed like a bad idea. But up he went and I was right behind him.

When the bough broke with a crack, he fell, smashing through other branches, and I scrambled back down the trunk. The lights came on but I got away before his family and the governor of the Commonwealth came out to find him on the ground laughing hysterically.

The next day, I was in big trouble at home. But I managed to go visit Mark. On the way, I passed Larry Cullen walking away from the Bannons' house. He crossed the street to avoid me.

Mark was in bed with a broken wrist and a bandage on his leg. The light was on in his eyes and he wore the same wild smile he'd had when he saw Larry Cullen. We both knew what had happened but neither had words to describe it. After that Mark and I tended to avoid each other.

Then my family moved away from the neighborhood and I forgot about the Bannons pretty much on purpose. So it was a surprise years later when I came home for Christmas that my mother said Mark Bannon wanted to speak to me.

"His mother called and asked about you," she said. "You know I've heard that Mark is in an awful way. They say Mike Bannon's taken that harder than losing the governorship.

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My father looked up from the paper and said, "Something took it out of Bannon. He sleepwalked through the campaign. And when it started he was the favorite."

Curiosity, if nothing else, led me to visit Mark. My parents now lived in the suburbs and I lived in New York. But the Bannons were still on Melville Avenue.

Mrs. Bannon was so sad when she smiled and greeted me that I would have done anything she asked.

When I saw Mark, one of the things he said was, "My angel's gone and he's not coming back." I thought of the lost, scared kid I'd led home from Fitzie's that night. I realized I was the only one, except maybe his mother, who he could tell any of this to.

I visited him a few times when I'd be up seeing my family. Mostly he was stoned on pills and booze and without the angel he seemed lobotomized. Sometimes we just watched television like we had as kids.

He told me about being dragged through strange and scary places in the world. "I guess he wasn't an angel. Or not a good one." Doctors had him on tranquilizers. Sometimes he slurred so badly I couldn't understand him.

Mike Bannon, out of office, was on committees and commissions and was a partner in a law firm. But he was home in his study a lot and the house was very quiet. Once as I was leaving, he called me in, asked me to sit down, offered me a drink.

He wondered how his son was doing. I said he seemed okay. We both knew this wasn't so. Bannon's face appeared loose, sagging.

He looked at me and his eyes flashed for a moment. "Most of us God gives certain...skills. They're so much a part of us we use them by instinct. We make the right move at the right moment and it's so smooth it's like someone else doing it.

"Marky had troubles but he also had moments like that. Someone told me the other day you and he saved a life down on the river when you were boys because he acted so fast. He's lost it now, that instinct. It's gone out like a light." It seemed he was trying to explain something to himself and I didn't know how to help him.

Mark died of an overdose, maybe an intentional one, and they asked me to speak at the memorial service. A few years later, Big Mike Bannon

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died. Someone in tribute said, "A superb political animal. Watching him in his prime rounding up a majority in the lower chamber was like seeing a cheetah run, an eagle soar..."

"...a rattlesnake strike," my father added.

8.

A couple of days after my meeting with Des Eliot, I flew to Quebec. A minor border security kerfuffle between the U.S. and Canada produced delays at both Newark International and Jean Lesage International.

It gave me a chance to think about the first time I'd gone on one of these quests. Shortly after her husband's death Mrs. Bannon had asked me to find Mark's angel.

A few things he'd told me when I'd visited, a hint or two his mother had picked up, allowed me to track one Frank Parnelli to the third floor of a walk-up in Washington Heights.

I knocked on the door, the eyehole opened and a woman inside asked, "Who is it?"

"I'm looking for Ruth Vega."

"She's not here."

"I'm looking for Mark Bannon."

"Who?"

"Or for Frank Parnelli."

The eyehole opened again. I heard whispers inside. "This will be the man we had known would come," someone said and the door opened.

Inside were statues and pictures and books everywhere: a black and white photo of Leon Trotsky, a woman's bowling trophy, and what looked like a complete set of Anna Freud's *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child.*

A tiny old woman with bright red hair and a hint of amusement in her expression stood in the middle of the room looking at me. "McCluskey, where have you been?"

"That's not McCluskey, Mother," said a much larger middle-aged woman in a tired voice.

"McCluskey from the Central Workers Council! Where's your cigar?" Suddenly she looked wise. "You're not smoking because of my big

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sister Sally, here. She hates them. I like a man who smokes a cigar. You were the one told me Woodrow Wilson was going to be president when I was a little kid. When it happened I thought you could foretell the future. Like I do."

"Why don't you sit down," the other woman said to me. "My niece is the one you're looking for. My mother's a little confused about past and present. Among other things."

"So McCluskey," said the old woman, "Who's it going to be next election? Roosevelt again, that old fascist?" I wondered whether she meant Teddy or FDR.

"I know who the Republicans are putting up," she said. It was 1975 and Gerald Ford was still drawing laughs by falling down stairs. I tried to look interested.

"That actor," she said. "Don Ameche. He'll beat the pants off President Carter." At that moment I'd never heard of Carter. "No not Ameche, the other one."

"Reagan?" I asked. I knew about him. Some years before he'd become governor of California, much to everyone's amusement.

"Yes, that's the one. See. Just the same way you told me about Wilson, you've told me about Reagan getting elected president."

"Would you like some tea while you wait?" asked the daughter, looking both bored and irritated.

We talked about a lot of things that afternoon. What I remembered some years later, of course, was the prediction about Reagan. With the Vega family there were always hints of the paranormal along with a healthy dose of doubletalk.

At that moment the door of the walk-up opened and a striking couple came in. He was a thug who had obviously done some boxing, with a nicely broken nose and a good suit. She was tall and in her late twenties with long legs in tight black pants, long red hair drawn back, a lot of cool distance in her green eyes.

At first glance the pair looked like a celebrity and her bodyguard. But the way Ruth Vega watched Frank Parnelli told me that somehow she was looking after him.

Parnelli stared at me. And a few years after I'd seen Marky Bannon's body lowered into the ground, I caught a glimpse of him in a stranger's eyes.

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That was what I remembered when I was east of Quebec walking uphill from the Vibeau Island Ferry dock.

Des knew where Ruth was, though he'd never actually dared to approach her. I believed if she wanted to stop me from seeing her, she would already have done it.

At a guess, Vibeau Island looked like an old fishing village that had become a summer vacation spot at some point in the mid-twentieth century and was now an exurb. Up here it was chilly even in the early afternoon.

I saw the woman with red hair standing at the end of a fishing pier. From a distance I thought Ruth Vega was feeding the ducks. Then I saw what she threw blow out onto the Saint Lawrence and realized she was tearing up papers and tossing them into the wind. On first glance, I would have said she looked remarkably as she had thirty years before.

I waited until I was close to ask, "What's wrong, Ms. Vega, your shredder broken?"

"McCluskey from the Central Workers Council," she said, and when she did, I saw her grandmother's face in hers. "I remember that first time we met, thinking that Mark's mother had chosen her operative well. You found her son and were very discreet about it."

We walked back to her house. It was a cottage with good sight lines in all directions and two large black schnauzers snarling in a pen.

"That first time was easy." I replied. "He remembered his family and wanted to be found. The second time was a few years later and that was much harder."

Ruth nodded. We sat in her living room. She had a little wine, I had some tea. The décor had a stark beauty, nothing unnecessary: a gun case, a computer, a Cy Twombly over the fireplace.

"The next time Mrs. Bannon sent me out to find her son, it was because she and he had lost touch. Frank Parnelli when I found him was a minor Village character. Mark no longer looked out from behind his eyes. He had no idea where you were. Your grandmother was a confused old woman wandering around her apartment in a nightgown.

"I had to go back to Mrs. Bannon and tell her I'd failed. It wasn't until a couple of years later that Svetlanov turned up."

"Mark and I were in love for a time," Ruth said. "He suggested

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jokingly once or twice that he leave Parnelli and come to me. I didn't want that and in truth he was afraid of someone he wouldn't be able to control.

"Finally being around Parnelli grew thin and I stopped seeing them. Not long afterward Mark abandoned Parnelli and we both left New York for different destinations. A few years later, I was living in the Yucatan and he showed up again. This time with an old acquaintance of mine.

"When I lived with Grandmother as a kid," Ruth said, "she was in her prime and all kinds of people were around. Political operatives, prophetesses, you name it. One was called Decker, this young guy with dark eyes and long dark hair like classical violinists wore. For a while he came around with some project on which he wanted my grandmother's advice. I thought he was very sexy. I was ten.

"Then he wasn't around the apartment. But I saw him: coming out of a bank, on the street walking past me with some woman. Once on a school trip to the United Nations Building, I saw him on the subway in a naval cadet's uniform.

"I got home that evening and my grandmother said, 'Have you seen that man Decker recently?' When I said yes, she told me to go do my homework and made a single very short phone call. Decker stopped appearing in my life.

"Until one night in Mexico a knock came on my door and there he stood looking not a day older than when I'd seen him last. For a brief moment, there was a flicker in his eyes and I knew Mark was there but not in control.

"Decker could touch and twist another's mind with his. My grandmother, though, had taught me the chant against intrusive thoughts. Uncle Dano had taught me how to draw, aim, and fire without even thinking about it.

"Killing is a stupid way to solve problems. But sometimes it's the only one. After Decker died I played host to Mark for about an hour before I found someone else for him to ride. He was like a spark, pure instinct unfettered by a soul. That's changed somewhat."

When it was time for my ferry back to the city, Ruth rose and walked down to the dock with me.

"I saw his sister on TV the other night when they announced she

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would be appointed to the Senate. I take it she's the one who's looking for him?"

I nodded and she said, "Before too long idiot senators will be trying to lodge civil liberty complaints after martial law has been declared and the security squads are on their way to the capital to throw them in jail. Without Mark she'll be one of them."

Before I went up the gangplank, she hugged me and said, "You think you're looking for him but he's actually waiting for you."

After a few days back in New York memories of Vibeau Island began to seem preposterous. Then I walked down my block late one night. It was crowded with tourists and college kids, barkers and bouncers. I saw people give the averted celebrity glance.

Then I spotted a black man with a round face and a shaven head. I did recognize him: an overnight hip-hop millionaire. He sat in the back of a stretch limo with the door open. Our eyes met. His widened then dulled and he sank back in his seat.

At that moment, I saw gray winter sky and felt the damp cold of the ice-covered Neponset. *On old familiar ground,* said a voice inside me and I knew Mark was back.

9.

SOME HOURS LATER passengers found seats as our train pulled out of New Haven.

"Ruth said you were waiting for me," I told Mark silently.

And Red Ruth is never wrong.

"She told me about Decker."

I thought I had selected him. But he had selected me. Once inside him I was trapped. He was a spider. I couldn't control him. Couldn't escape. I led him to Ruth as I was told.

He showed me an image of Ruth pointing an automatic pistol, firing at close range.

I leaped to her as he died. She was more relentless than Decker in some ways. I had to promise to make my existence worthwhile. To make the world better.

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"If angels fight, weak men must fall."

Not exactly an angel. Ego! Id! Fragment! Parasite!

I thought of how his father had something like an angel himself.

His body, soul, and mind were a single entity. Mine weren't.

I saw his memory of Mike Bannon smiling and waving in the curved front windows of his house at well-wishers on the snowy front lawn. Bannon senior never questioned his own skills or wondered what would have happened if they'd been trapped in a brain that was mildly damaged. Then he saw it happen to his son.

Once I understood that, he showed me the dark tower again with two tiny slits of light high above. I found hand- and foot-holds and crawled up the interior stone walls. This time I looked through the slits of light and saw they were the eyeholes of a mask. In front of me were Mike and Marie Bannon looking very young and startled by the sudden light in the eyes of their troublingly quiet little boy.

When the train approached Boston, the one inside me said, *Let's see the old neighborhood.*

We took a taxi from Back Bay and drove out to Dorchester. We saw the school we'd gone to and the courthouse and place where I'd lived and the houses that stood where Fitzie's had once been.

My first great escape.

That night so long ago came back. Larry Cullen, seen through the eyeholes of a mask, stood with his thin psycho smile. In a flash I saw Mark Bannon slack-jawed and felt Cullen's cold fear as the angel took hold of his mind and looked out through his eyes.

Cullen's life was all horror and hate. His father was a monster. It should have taught me something. Instead I felt like I'd broken out of jail. After each time away from my own body it was harder to go back.

Melville Avenue looked pretty much the way it always did. Mrs. Bannon still lived in the family house. We got out of the car and the one inside me said, *When all this is over, it won't be forgotten that you brought me back to my family.*

In the days since then, as politics has become more dangerous, Carol Bannon has grown bolder and wilier. And I wonder what form the remembering will take.

Mrs. Bannon's caregiver opened the door. We were expected. Carol

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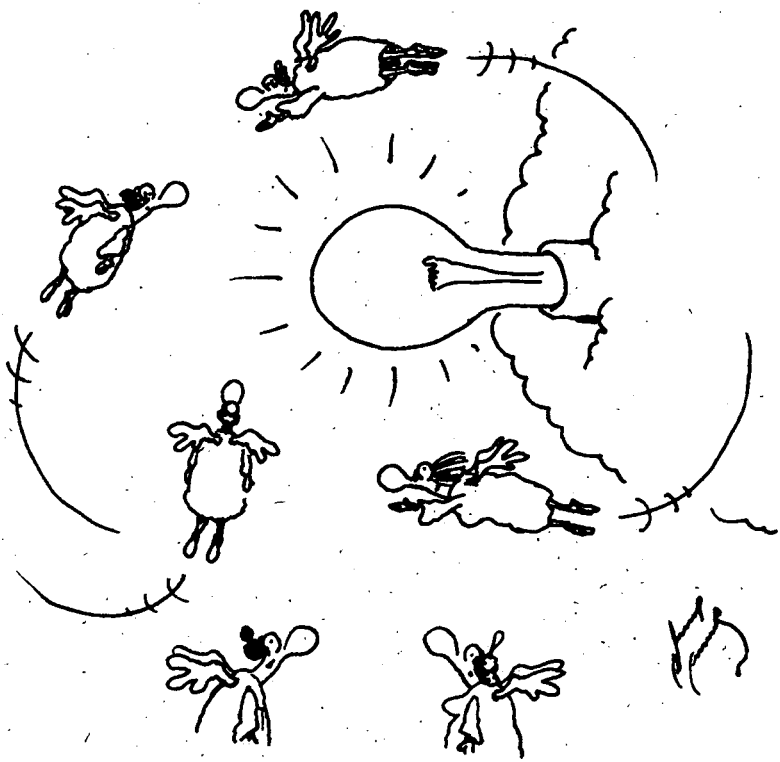
stood at the top of the stairs very much in command. I thought of her father.

"My mother's waiting to see you," she said. I understood that I would spend a few minutes with Mrs. Bannon and then depart. Carol looked right into my eyes and kissed me. Her eyes flashed and she smiled.

In that instant the one inside my head departed. The wonderful sharpness went out of the morning and I felt a touch of the desolation that Mark Bannon and all the others must have felt when the angel deserted them.



"This isn't what I expected when I was floating toward the light."

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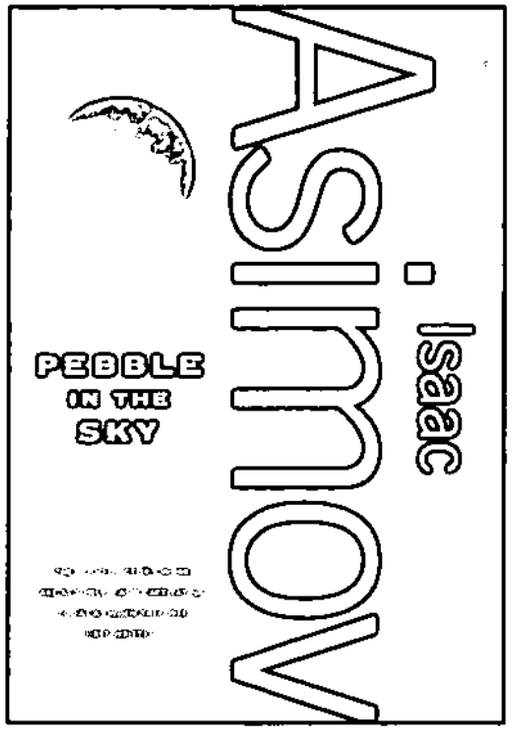

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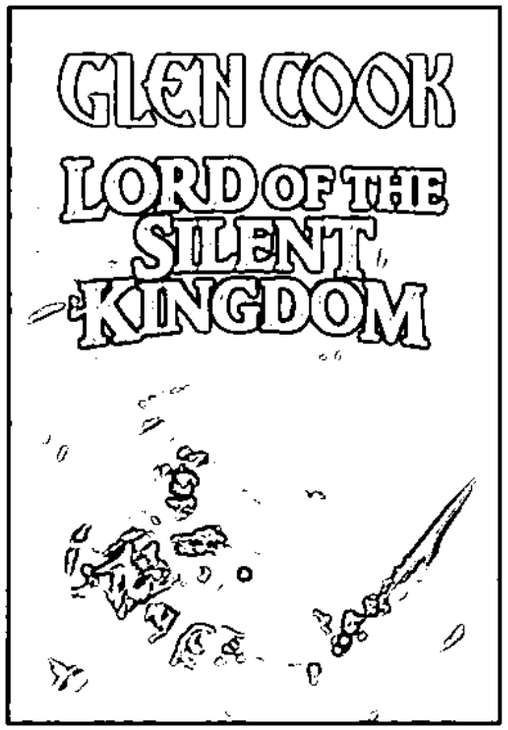

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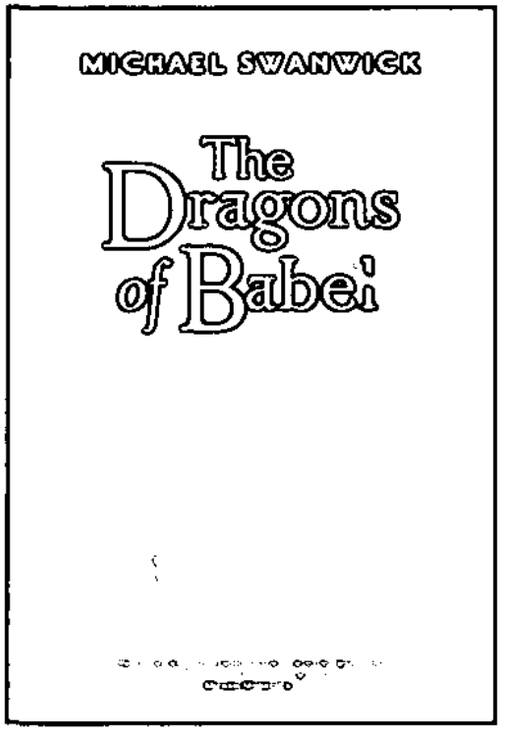

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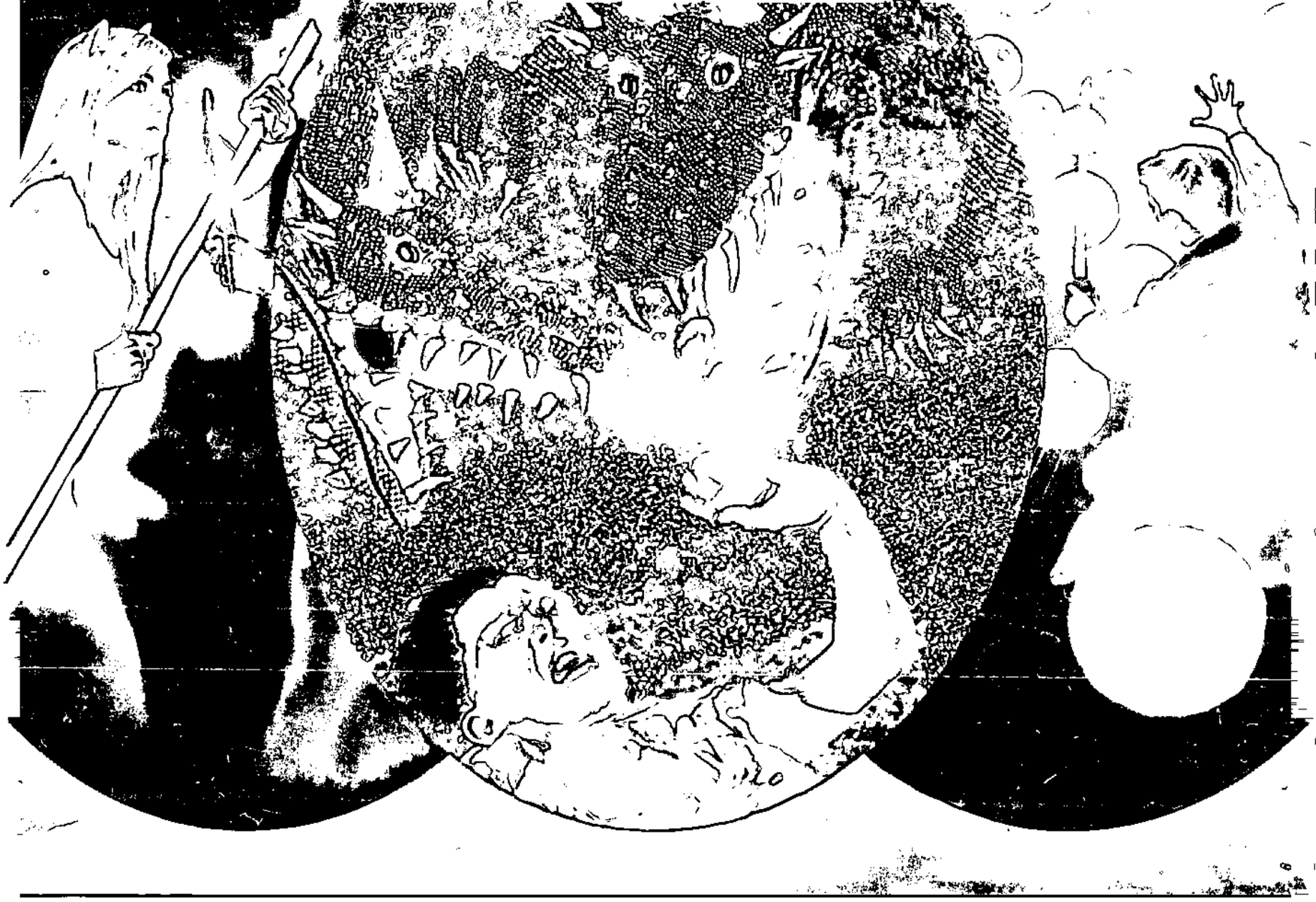

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